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THE MAGAZINE OF Fantasy & Science Fiction

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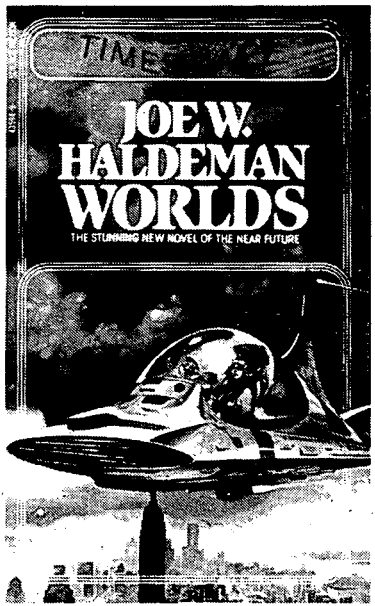

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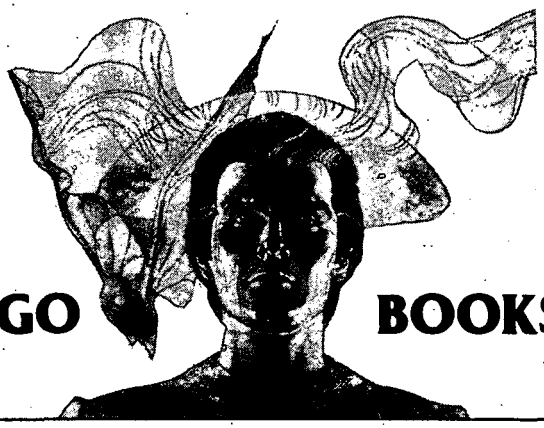

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This is the longest, and very possibly the best of Susan Petrey's stories about the Varkela healers of the Russian steppe. It explores the strange connection between a contemporary lab technologist and the vampire-like healers of 1845 Russia.

Leechcraft

BY

SUSAN PETREY

Leechcraft: the art of healing (archaic)
also the art of blood-letting.
Words and Their Origins
K.A. Haberthal

At 1:30 a.m. Myrna, the lab technologist, bent over a struggling patient, syringe in hand, and searched his arm for a vein. Dr. Meyer, one of the interns, held the man down as Myrna tried to tie the tourniquet.

"What's wrong with this guy?" she asked.

"DT's," said the intern.

"How come you don't tranquilize him?" asked Myrna.

"I don't like to coddle alcoholics."

Myrna found a vein in the emaciated arm and shoved the needle ome, but the patient flinched away. When she pulled back the plunger, she drew no blood, only a vacuum.

"What's wrong, Vampira? Forget to sharpen your teeth this evening?" quipped the intern.

Myrna groaned inwardly. Vampire jokes were an occupational hazard of medical technology. She withdrew the needle and tried again. This time she was successful.

"Now that's more like it," said Dr. Meyer. "I was afraid I was going to have to waste an hour, showing you how. Can we get STAT amylase, CBC and a crossmatch on that?"

Myrna injected the blood into tubes, some with anti-coagulant, some without. "Why does he need a crossmatch, STAT?" she asked. "Are you going to do surgery?" In hospital jargon STAT meant immediately.

"He needs it STAT because I ordered it STAT. Who's the doctor here, you or me?" said the intern.

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"I want to know, because if I have to work my fanny off all night, I'd like to think it's for a good reason. Not just because some doctor decided to write STAT on the order."

"My, you're an assertive little lady," said Dr. Meyer. "If you must know, yes, we might have to do surgery. We think this guy has a 'hot' appendix, and the sooner you get those lab reports back, the sooner we'll know. So hustle back to the lab and get busy. You might win a date with a handsome, young doctor."

"Yuck!" said Myrna and walked away, leaving him standing there with a quizzical look on his face.

"Vampira, indeed!" she said under her breath as she stabbed at the elevator button. But when she thought about it, it made sense. A blood-drawer intent on collecting a specimen had to have a knowledge of veins and arteries, had to have a calming effect on agitated patients, and had to be able to coax blood out of the weakest, most scarred old veins; in effect, had to think somewhat like a vampire.

When she got back to the lab, she plopped the tubes of blood into the centrifuge to spin down the clot. She threw a switch and a grumbling roar commenced as the centrifuge gained speed.

The lab was a small room crowded with machine consoles. Myrna took an anti-coagulated sample and fed it to "Clarabelle" the Coulter Counter, which slurped it up in pneumatic tubing. She watched as the little snake of red traveled up the tubing and into the reaction chambers. Winking indicated that the red and white blood cells were being counted. The printer chattered and spat out answers: Hematocrit 47.8, White Cell Count 16,700.

The hematocrit, the percentage of red blood cells, was normal but the white count was elevated. They would probably operate if the amylase was normal. A high amylase meant that the pancreas, not the appendix was involved.

When the centrifuge clicked off at the end of ten minutes, Myrna reached in and slowed the spinning head with her hand to save precious minutes. She grabbed four squishy plastic bags of blood out of the refrigerator and lined them up on her desk to set up the crossmatch. Then she took serum to another console to run the amylase.

On the day shift, 30 people worked in the laboratory. On the graveyard shift, Myrna worked alone, handling the emergencies. She was a genius of time organization, as one had to be to keep up with the work of a whole hospital on a busy night. She often felt that the doctors and nurses got all the glory and that she was one of medicine's unsung heroes.

The amylase was normal. Myrna checked her crossmatch tubes and saw no clumping, a compatible reaction. She phoned Dr. Meyer with the report.

"Well, I guess you'll have to set up that crossmatch after all," he said.

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"I already did," she said. "You've got four compatible units for surgery."

"My God, woman, you must be the fastest crossmatch in the West," he said, "How would you like to go out Saturday night?"

"I'm busy," said Myrna. "I've got to get my horse ready for a show."

"You mean you'd turn me down in favor a horse?"

"Absolutely," and she hung up on him.

Shanty, a big Tennessee walking horse gelding, was the love interest in Myrna's life. His big free-swinging stride had carried her to the Plantation Walking Horse trophy last year. On the back of her tall graceful horse, Myrna felt a sense of accomplishment similar to that which she felt in her work. A lab tech working the night shift did not have much time to develop a social life, but Myrna sometimes went out of her way to avoid contact with men. And when she did go out, she was careful not to get involved. She had loved once and decided that was enough to play the fool.

She usually found herself the huntress, the predator, the seducer in her relationships. The men she ensnared on her forays into beery, cigarette-smelling nightspots were sometimes unkind. One had called her "hairy chested" after seeing the patch of silken mouse-like down that grew between her breasts. Before embracing them to that hirsute bosom, she sometimes warned, "Be careful, I bite." But after the orgasmic relief, she was always left feeling vaguely unsatisfied. Even the one man who had loved her had not fulfilled all her need, and she had backed out of the relationship feeling guilty and ungrateful. She sometimes wondered if she might be a changeling from some secret elder race.

Now that all her work was finished, she was free until the next emergency cropped up. Myrna loved the stressful nature of her work. When she had nothing to do, she would drift off into fantasies. She would imagine that she could travel back in time and bring modern medicine into a primitive setting.

Tonight she was working in an early 19th century laboratory with Robert Koch, founder of modern bacteriology. She was showing him how the growth of bread mold on a gelatin plate could inhibit the growth of bacterial colonies. Out of gratitude he pledged her his undying love and devotion (all in German) and crushed her against his bushy, bearded face, losing his pince-nez in the process.

Now that was silly!

She was feeling bored and hoped something would happen to get her through the rest of the night. "The sad irony of it is," she thought, "that nothing fun happens around here unless someone's dying," and with this ghoulish thought in mind she put her Bell-Boy beeper in her pocket and went downstairs to get hot brown water out of the coffee machine.

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II.

1845. Russia. The Caucasus.

Against dark hills burst occasional red flares as Imam Shamil's troops displayed their heavy artillery against the forces of Czar Alexander II. An orange blast of cannon fire exploded in the night, and in the distance could be heard the crack of musket fire and the shouts of men. Outside a large tent, a horse-drawn wagon pulled to a halt in the mud.

"There are two more wounded out here," a voice called. "One's taken a ball in the leg and the other has a saber wound in the gut."

"Thank you," another voice answered from the depths of the tent. "Please put them on my last two beds."

In the dark, stuffy tent Valance knelt by a pallet on the mud floor. One of his patients was dying. He peeled back the bloody piece of cloth and observed the neat flax string stitches that closed the wound. The man stirred in his uneasy sleep. The bleeding had stopped externally but not internally, and if it did not stop soon, he would have to resort to the dangerous procedure of transfusion.

"How's he doing?" asked Dr. Rimsky as he made his way among the pallets, holding a lantern high.

Valance squinted away from the lantern. "He needs transfusion."

The art of transfusion was seldom practiced in European medicine after the studies of Robert Boyle and others in the 17th century had shown it to be often fatal to the recipient. Valance, however, had learned his medical skill from a different tradition and had devised a method that worked fairly well in most cases.

"It's up to you to do it, then," said the doctor. "You have the best luck with it of anybody I've ever seen. I won't try my hand at it. Killed more than I ever saved with that method."

"Well, I guess I'd better find a donor then," Valance stood up. He was tall, lean and dark-haired with a sickly sallow complexion, and the most striking dark eyes — eyes that could read the soul. He staggered as he tried to stand, and Dr. Rimsky caught his arm to help him stabilize.

"I know you're not one of us, lad," said the doctor, "but even you must have your limits. You haven't been eating lately. Something is wrong."

"It bothers my conscience to feed, when you are all so sickly," said Valance. "When you were all fat and healthy, it was different. Now the cost is too high."

"Small good you'll be to us if you shrivel up and die of starvation," said the doctor. But he saw that his strange young friend was not to be persuaded. Valance, when he set his mind to follow his own inner law, was never waylaid by good advice. The fast would continue.

A year ago Valance had gone to Dr. Rimsky to tell him that he wished to serve in this war. Rimsky, an army surgeon, gray with age and much responsibility, had tried to discourage

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this young son of the Varkela from serving with the Russian soldiers.

"They would not accept you once they found you out, dear Valance," said the older man. "They would find out your hiding place and stake you while you slept. I cannot allow it. You must serve the Lord in some other way."

"You misunderstand my meaning," said Valance, fingering the wooden cross at his throat. "I would not serve as a soldier, but as a medical assistant with you. I must, for you, because you have saved me from the black-water sickness. You know my people are known for their herbal lore, leechcraft, and some for the healer's touch, and you have taught me much of the science of surgery. Let me come with you."

"The Varkela are known for other things besides their skill at healing," said Rimsky. "Even as a convert, you would be mistrusted by the men, and, besides, this is not your war, Valance. Your people are considered Tartar and not subject to the Czar."

Rimsky hoped that Valance would survive the war and become a leader of his people, an ancient race which might become extinct. He had met Valance's father while stationed near the Caucasus. He had been surprised to find the old Varkela leechman living with a group of Kalmuck nomadic tribesmen who still paid the ancient "blood-price" for his medical services.

Valance had not given up, however. "You forget," he said, "that I was born on Russian soil. And, remember, it has always been the custom of my people to heal the sick and wounded. When the Mongols came over the steppes and made war, did not we Varkela come in the night to ease pain and bind up wounds? All I require is that you provide me with a place to sleep, and I will keep the night watch while you work days."

"Very well," Dr. Rimsky had sighed. "You have my permission, and I will be very glad to have your assistance."

The volunteer came into the dimly lighted tent and sat on the campstool. Valance recognized the man.

"You can't give blood again so soon, Sarnov," he said. "It takes at least a month for your body to make more. Go and send someone else."

A few minutes later another man came and presented himself. Valance had him lie on the cot next to the wounded man and rolled up his sleeve. He applied the tourniquet and the veins bulged like rope cords. As he worked, Valance sang softly the "sleeping song" of his people which had the effect of inducing a hypnotic state in the volunteer. With his fingers he traced the swollen veins. He could actually hear the blood hum as it pulsed through the arteries like the rushing of water in subterranean caverns. His mouth began to water as he knelt next to the cot. Gentle as a kiss, his mouth

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touched the exposed arm, his hollow teeth entered the vein, and a swirl of blood flowed into his mouth. A taste was enough to tell him what he wanted to know. He withdrew his mouth and licked at the wound with his thin, dog-like tongue. Saliva from his lower gland bathed the prick and stopped the bleeding.

There were four blood types Valance could recognize by taste: salty, more salty, bitter and slightly sweet. This was the bitter, same as his patient, and without further delay he began to set up the transfusion. He had two hollow needles, and connecting the two was a crude form of rubber tubing. In the middle of the tubing was a glass reservoir with a pair of stopcock valves, a glass-blower's nightmare. Valance selected the proper vein on the donor's arm and inserted the upper needle, and the lower he placed into the chosen vein of his patient. Slowly the reservoir filled with the dark fluid. Valance reversed the stopcock and forced air into a vent on the side of the reservoir, and it slowly emptied.

Knowing that there are four major blood types was a breakthrough in the art of transfusion, but it didn't rule out all danger. There was an antibody lurking in the serum of the patient. A more sophisticated test might have detected the telltale clumping in the bottom of a test tube, but Valance, limited to tasting the blood, missed it completely. For this reason he did not know anything was wrong until he saw the skin of his patient go all mottled with reddish splotches. He yanked the needle from the arm, but it was too late to save the man. Hemolysed red blood cells had already dumped a toxic load of raw hemoglobin into the system. The patient burned with fever as the night wore on. His kidneys, confronted with the hemoglobin, failed, and he entered the coma from which there was no return. As the sun came up, the surgical assistant fought his weariness and stayed near his patient's side, but abruptly the man ceased to breathe, and Valance admitted defeat. There was nothing to do but clean all the paraphernalia and remove the corpse for burial.

Valance went to Dr. Rimsky's tent and woke the doctor. After telling him of the failed transfusion, he prepared to sleep. He always slept in Dr. Rimsky's tent, which was strictly off-limits to everyone except himself and the doctor. Valance lay on his cot thinking. Presently his breathing slowed and his pulse dropped to 20 beats per minute. He slept as only the Varkela sleep.

Valance awoke with a start to find a crushing weight on his chest. The sun had gone down: it was time for him to work again, but something was wrong. Around him he heard the sounds of men groaning in pain. Hoofbeats approached and then receded in the distance. Then he heard a voice:

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"The medical tent's been hit! Give us a hand."

Valance struggled with the weight on his chest and found it was a dead man.

"Over here!" he called to the voices.

Someone was moving the heavy tent cloth, and then strong hands reached in and pulled him from the wreckage. Valance then helped his rescuer, a large man in an ill-fitting black infantryman's uniform, to clear away the remains of the tent and find the wounded men.

"Shamil's broken through the front here," said the burly soldier as he hefted a stump-legged patient.

"Go and find me a wagon to move the wounded," Valance ordered.

Valance began to check his patients, who were lying scattered about on the muddy ground. Several of them had died, perhaps from shock or suffocation when the tent was hit. A cannon ball whistled overhead and burrowed into the clay of a nearby embankment. Suddenly he realized Dr. Rimsky was missing. He blundered back into the tent and floundered amid the fallen poles and tent cloth unti lhe found the doctor lying face-down. He was wet all over and the smell of fresh blood hung heavy on the night air. Valance turned Rimsky over and saw where a tent pole had slashed an artery in his arm. He found the doctor's medical kit and began to work, quickly removing the pole and applying a pressure bandage to the wound. He prayed that the bleeding would stop.

Then he heard the approach of wagon wheels. The big soldier was back with two others, and they began to load the wounded into the cart. Valance lifted the doctor gingerly and placed him in the wagon. Then he climbed up and stayed at the doctor's side as the wagon creaked slowly over the soggy ground. By two hours past midnight they had reached an encampment of supply wagons.

A tall grimacing officer with epaulets on his shoulders approached the wagon on horseback.

"We are the Fourth Medical Unit," said Valance, "or rather what's left of it. The doctor is wounded. I am surgical assistant."

The officer nodded and called to some men by the supply depot. In an hour they had the tent up and had made the patients as comfortable as possible. There were six patients left, including Dr. Rimsky. As Valance made his rounds, he was encouraged to see that one of his patients with the leg amputated at the knee was doing well. The man's fever had responded to an infusion of willow leaves, and the stump was healing without infection.

Valance was worried about Dr. Rimsky, however, and he decided to re-dress the wound. But when he set the new bandage in place, he saw where the blood still oozed to darken the fresh white cloth. And he realized

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his hunger. The nearness of blood was beginning to affect him again. He hastily finished the dressing and stepped out of the tent to gaze at the moon. The moon waned in the eastern sky, a thin scimitar of light. In a few nights would come the dark of the moon, the blood-moon, as his people called it.

The Varkela had originally been horse nomads of the Eurasian steppes, wandering from tribe to tribe, exchanging their skill at healing for the blood-price. For centuries they had survived, one here, a few there, in close association with humankind, yet always a race apart, a secret brotherhood. According to oral tradition, they had served in the legions of Attila the Hun around 400 AD, and when Batu Khan, grandson of Genghis, invaded the Russian frontier, he found tribes that still employed the services of the old Varkela leechman. By Valance's time they had mostly died out or had interbred with humankind to the extent that the old genetic traits had been diluted out. One occasionally ran across Varkela characteristics among the Circassian people of the Caucasus or their Tartar neighbors on the steppes. Every now and then, a youth would have those dark, seductive eyes that seemed to exert so much power over the beholder. Or there would be a Tartar brave with such uncanny ability to train horses that people would say of him, "He speaks the horses' language" Blood-need was of course extremely uncommon. One Circassian folktale tells of the wolf-minded Tartar maid who lures a Cossack youth away into the night to drink his blood.

The Varkela had left their imprint on the Slavic racial memory in the form of vampire stories. By their strange nocturnal habits and their state of daylight dormancy, they had been regarded as "undead," the nosferatu. The old Greek word for vampire, "vrkolakas," may be a corruption of Varkela, the "children of the night."

As the gray dawn appeared, Valance left the medical tent and sought out the officer he had seen earlier. He found the man sitting on a wooden crate, cleaning a small flintlock handgun that rested on his knee. The officer forced a wet rag down the small bore with a straight alder stick, and with loving hands he polished the smudges of powder burn from the browned metal flashpan. His well-fed gray mare stood patiently tied to the supply wagon. It raised its head and swiveled its ears toward Valance, making a barely audible nicker. Valance scratched the animal's poll.

"A fine animal you've got here," he said. Then he proceeded with his lie:

"I must go to a nearby village and seek sheeting to make bandages. Could you please assign someone to stay with the wounded until I return?" He hoped this would be a good excuse to sneak away and take his daytime sleep. He no longer had Dr. Rimsky to explain

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away his odd habits. The taciturn officer nodded and continued his polishing. Valance turned to take his leave, then added:

"By the way, your horse has a stone wedged in her left fore hoof."

The road to the village branched, and Valance took the less traveled fork. Soon he was ascending a small hillock that was heavily wooded. The increasing light made it hard for him to see, and he welcomed the shadow of the trees. He found a dense thicket where he hoped he would not be discovered, and burrowing into the underbrush, he flattened the grasses and made a place to lie down. He drowsed, pondering his troubles. He might have to transfuse Dr. Rimsky, his dearest friend, yet he feared to take the risk without further knowledge. He would have to risk dreamwalk to find the answer. The trouble with dreamwalking was that he never knew where he might end up, and he needed someone else to help him do it, but it was the only course open to him. With resolution, Valance stopped breathing, slowed his heart and loosed his soul into the void.

He felt as if he were lifted up above the gently rolling hills of the Russian countryside, and he could see the grove where he slept far below. Then the landscape shimmered and disappeared, and in its place came the flat, dry grasslands of the open steppe. A yurt, a tent-like dwelling, stood like a bump in the flat plain, its felt cloth sides rippling in the wind. A few scruffy horses were grazing nearby, and a two-humped Bactrian camel lay sunning itself, its face toward the wind. The surroundings shimmered again, and Valance found himself inside the arched cane poles of the yurt. On a wicker couch lay an old man, whose leathern Tartar features, windburned and ancient, did not change, but he acknowledged the presence in the yurt.

"My son, do you dreamwalk?" asked the old man.

"My father, I greet thee from the void," answered Valance. "I feel myself being pulled forward in the river of time, and I need your help." Valance explained his predicament to his father.

"The last time something like this happened," said Freneer, the father, "you almost brought back that unclean woman as your blood-love. You know I am against out-blood liaisons of yours. Favarka's been dead a long time, and I think you should take another mate. I am seeking a Varkela wife for you. You must consider Valance that we are dying out as a race, if the young men do not produce offspring, the 'old knowledge' will die with us."

"I don't intend to let you breed me like a horse, Father," said Valance. "Right now marriage is far away from my thoughts. I must find a way to save Dr. Rimsky."

"And yet you let that Russian doc-

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tor study you like some species of beetle — but I know he is your friend, and I will help you — but you must promise to choose some wolf-minded girl, just as I chose your mother Odakai."

Valance remembered his mother, a Varkela woman who had left the steppes to live in Moscow, where she practiced as a medium and spiritual healer under the name of Anna Varkeerovna. He had lived with her until he was about thirteen, learning French and English in the drawing-room society of Moscow, and then she had taken him back to the steppe to study leechcraft with his father. One night on their journey to the steppes she had come across a wolf cub which she had picked up and carried for a while across her saddle bow, saying to her young son: "This is the soul-beast of your blood-love, Valance." His parents insisted on pedigree.

"Very well, a wolf-minded girl," Valance agreed, "but in my own time, Father, and in my own way."

"Well, then," said the old leechman, "let us begin." He took his staghorn rattles from the altar and sat cross-legged on the rug. Beating the horns together, he began to croon softly in the old language.

Valance sat on the rug opposite his father and concentrated on Dr. Rimsky. Gradually the singing got softer and Valance felt time, like a river, flowing around him. He let go and drifted with the current. Then he did not hear the singing anymore; in its stead came a sound like rushing water in his ears. He entrusted himself to the forward dream and waited.

III

Myrna sat up with a start. A face at the blood-bank window was enough to jolt her from her reverie.

"Got a live one for you down in admitting!" said the intern, offering Myrna tubes of blood. "Not bleeding now but he seems to have lost a lot somewhere along the way. Hematocrit of 16. Dressed like he was going to a costume party. Also he didn't have any I.D. So we just gave him a number. And if you haven't already guessed, we want it STAT."

Myrna fed a sample to "Clarabelle" and got a reading: Hematocrit 15.9%, white cell count 4000.

"He won't live long at that rate," she said, as she plopped the tube into the centrifuge to spin. She was most concerned about the low hematocrit, the volume of red blood cells expressed as a percentage. Normal for an adult male was around 45%. At 15.9 this patient wasn't doing at all well.

When the centrifuge stopped turning, Myrna retrieved the tube of blood, separated the serum from the clot and prepared to type the sample. She added typing serum, spun the tubes and frowned.

"Damn it! He doesn't type," she said, looking at the mixed-field ag-

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glutination in the A tube. "Must be a weak subtype of A; either that, or someone's been mixing A and O together." Uncertainty about a blood type was about the worst problem a tech could have when blood was needed for transfusion.

Myrna had seen a reaction like this only twice before. Once had been when a patient of type O had been mistakenly given type A. The other had been when she was new on the job, just out of training school. An intern had brought her a specimen to type for a "friend." She had at first been puzzled until she looked at the name on the tube: "I.M. Nosferatu." Then she had to laugh. Someone was pulling her leg. The intern had mixed A and O together as they might be expected to occur in the stomach of the fictitious Mr. Nosferatu. It was the ultimate vampire joke.

The man would have to be transfused with such a low hematocrit. So Myrna decided the best thing to do would be to collect a fresh specimen and repeat the tests. Hopefully someone had made a mistake the first time. She filled a tray with the tools of her trade: sterile needles encased in plastic, rubber tourniquet, vacutaner tubes, cotton swabs, alcohol and skin tape. Then she took the elevator to the intensive care unit.

The sweet, sickly odor of the patients hit her as she walked into the ICU. The most critical patients lay in full view of the nursing station, looking like a row of strange vegetables planted in a garden of wires and plastic tubing. The heart monitors peeped every few seconds, and electric recording devices hummed in the background.

"Hi, Rose," she said to the older woman at the nursing station. "I need a new specimen on your Mr. No. 3489."

"First door on your left," said Rose, "and good luck. I don't think he's got any blood left."

She had expected him to be unconscious when she entered the room, but he was awake and looking at her. He looked to be about 30, with a shaggy crop of black hair and the most striking dark eyes that glowed faintly as if there were light inside of him. There was something too intimate about looking into those eyes.

And then Myrna had one of those occasions that people in her family called "second sight." She seemed to see a woman, wearing a Cossack's baggy clothing and a fur cap, sitting astride a horse facing into the wind. In the crook of her arm was a wolf cub. The woman stroked the cub and turned her head toward Myrna and smiled at her with those same large dark eyes. She spoke a few words and then the image faded. Myrna realized she was standing there staring at the patient, who regarded her with a whimsical smile.

"This must be an English hospital and you are the leech," he said. He had an accent, although she couldn't place it, and she instinctively knew that he

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used the word "leech" in its oldest sense, the archaic term for "doctor."

"I suppose you could call me a leech of sorts," she said, "but I'm not a doctor, I'm a medical technologist. And this isn't England. You're in America, friend."

"America!" he exclaimed. "I thought there were only wild Indians and revolutionaries living there. What year is this?"

"Nineteen seventy-nine," she said.

"My God!" he said. "When I went to sleep it was 1845."

"What did you do, fall asleep in a time machine? Or are you Rip Van Winkle?"

"Neither, I hope," he said. "If things are what I think they are, then I'm dreamwalking, and I'm not really here."

"We'll see about that," she said tying the tourniquet around his arm and swabbing vigorously with alcohol. She stuck the needle into his arm and pushed the vacutaner down snugly, breaking the vacuum. Blood was sucked into the tube. Suddenly he clenched his arm, causing the needle to pop out leaving a little trail of red. His hand closed over her wrist tightly.

"Do not take from me, little blood-thief," he said. "I don't have enough to give."

"You don't understand," she said. "I must test your blood for the right type and do a crossmatch. Then they will give you a transfusion because you have lost much blood."

"I have not lost any," he said. "But I have need of it. I have not taken blood in a month." After divulging this bit of information he stared at the few drops of blood in the tube. Perplexed, he said, "Perhaps I'm really here and Rimsky is over one hundred years dead." He lay back on the pillow and closed his eyes. He seemed to be concentrating on something very far away. For a moment she seemed to see his image fade before her eyes so that she thought she could see through him, and then he was back, solid as before.

"It's all right," he said. "I can still hear my father's voice if I listen."

Something very odd was going on here. She wrinkled her brow and studied him for a moment. Then businesslike and efficient, she retied the tourniquet.

"I don't know what's happening," she said, "but whatever it is, my time-travelling friend, you had better give me some blood so I can get back to the lab, or you are going to be one sick turkey." She tried to maintain a calm appearance as she bent over him to obtain the specimen.

There was something about this woman that attracted Valance. For a brief moment, when he had looked into her eyes, he thought he had seen the "look of the wolf." And there was something else. Beneath the civilized odor of colonge and talc, he detected a fragrance, imperceptible to humankind, of something definitely feral, as

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wild and sweet as the crushed leaves of his medicinal herbs, and this excited him. It called to mind a verse from one of the great Varkela love poems. He converted it into English in his mind and came up with: "Ah, woman, the scent of thy wolvish cunt hath turned my head." It was intended as a compliment, but was definitely not the sort of thing one said to an English-speaking lady in his time; so he kept it to himself.

As she bent over him, he observed that her hair was piled up on her head and held in place by a clip. The nape of her neck was lovely and vulnerable in the half-light, and he felt a strong urge to press his lips to her inviting throat and sink his cat-like teeth into the pulsing artery. Thinking this way caused him to have an erection, and he smiled inwardly at his attempt to stifle the impulse. This Christianity that he practiced was more difficult than the shamanistic religion of Freneer, his father. One of the saints had called the body "brother ass," an appropriate term for his, as it sometimes went stubbornly astray.

She finished drawing the blood sample and left the room, taking her fragrance with her. If she gave him blood, he would have to give her something in return. He knew some members of his race, especially those in the Balkan countries, stole blood like vile insects, giving neither love nor leechcraft in return.

It had been a long time since he had shared blood-love with a woman. Service in the Czar's army did not provide many opportunities. He had counted himself lucky when at the age of 17 he had won the love of Favarka, a full-blooded Varkela. Women were so rare that he'd shared her with another older man, according to their custom, but she'd called him "favorite." She had curbed his youthful exuberance, taught him the tender art of control. She was ten years dead, but he sometimes though of her and the times he had laid his head on the soft fur between her breasts. He still carried the small scars where Favarka in her passion had marked him hers with love bites.

Back at the lab, Myrna fussed with her test tubes and got the same frustrating results. Holding the tubes up to the light, she saw little red flecks in the typing serum.

"This will have to do, I guess," she said.

Dr. Meyer was waiting at the window, impatiently drumming his fingers along the counter top.

"You'll have to sign for this one," said Myrna.

"That bad, huh?" he said.

"He doesn't type," she said. "I called my supervisor and she said, give O-negative packed cells. At least he doesn't have any serum antibodies that I can detect."

"Maybe it's a hypoimmune response," said Dr. Myer. "You know, that guy is a weird. 'Crit of 16, and he

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sits up in bed asking me questions all night. I'm surprised he can move his mouth, let alone sit up. You'd better loan him one of your books on blood-banking. He's asking things that are over my head.

At 5:00 a.m. when things had quieted down, Myrna was washing out the tubing on the auto-analyzer. She was finished and just about to get a cup of coffee, when she heard it. She did not exactly "hear" it, for there was no sound, but the definite words came to her: "Come to me," they said.

She got her coffee and sat down at the lab bench to think this over.

"Come to me."

It was a voice inside her head pleading subtly but insistently. *It was him.* It had to be him.

Her curiousity compelled her sufficiently that when Ernie the security guard came by, she asked him to watch the phone while she went upstairs.

The ICU was quiet except for the beep-beep of the heart monitors. When she entered the room, her patient was lying back on the bed with a smile on his face and a little white tooth projected over his lower lip. He had taken the IV needle from his arm and placed the tubing over one of his teeth. The blood bag, hung on a rack overhead, was emptying visibly. He seemed quite pleased with himself.

"You didn't come right away," he said. "That means you are somewhat wolf-minded — sit here." He pointed to the bed. His voice was quiet, but she could feel the command in it. And she felt an overwhelming desire to obey his commands, especially when she looked into those dark, seductive eyes. Somehow she resisted: he would not have fun at her expense. What is happening, she thought, is that he is trying to control my mind. With an effort, she raised her eyes from his.

"Supposing I refuse," she said.

His spell was broken, but he didn't look at all unhappy about it, in fact quite the contrary.

"You know, you're one of the few people who can do that?" he said. "This is even better than I'd hoped." His eyes appraised her carefully, with a certain longing, laced with self-confidence.

She detested his smugness. "You'd beter get that needle back in your arm before a nurse catches you."

He heaved a languorous sigh and winked at her.

She shivered and walked determinedly from the room. Half way down the hall, she heard it again: "Come back."

"The hell I will," thought Myrna.

"Please?"

"No!"

He was ecstatic to think that he could find a wolf-minded girl in this place.

At 8:00 a.m. Myrna went home from the hospital. She unlocked the door to her small apartment, crossed

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the room and turned on the television to keep her company. A blink of light, and the Morning Show came on. A psychiatrist was being interviewed about the effect of modern technology on the psyche. "We may find," he was saying, "that man needs mythology more than all the conveniences of our modern age." Myrna left the voices mumbling behind her, as she took the few steps to the kitchen. She stooped to open the small refrigerator that fitted under the counter and peered among the cottage cheese cartons and plastic-wrapped packages. She selected a package of two-day-old chicken, removed a drumstick and shut the door.

Her small breakfast finished, she turned off the TV and opened the bedroom door. In one corner stood a clothes hamper stuffed to overflowing, and in the middle of the room lay a mattress under a heap of blankets. Beside it were piled the books she was currently reading. There was also the letter from Terry, in which he complained of her inability to say the word "love." The most she would say to someone she felt close to was "I care for you." She had written back to him: "There is something wild in me that won't be caged by love."

Along one wall of her room was a bookcase that reached from floor to ceiling. She went to the wall and searched among the titles. Following one row with her finger, she stopped on *The Vampire, His Kith and Kin*, by Montagu Sommers. She tossed it on the bed and went to the bureau and opened the top drawer. She searched a while among the lipstick cases, pill bottles and mismatched socks. It wasn't there. She pulled open the next drawer and sorted around the underwear until she found the little wooden jewelry box. Inside the box, tangled in a mass of neck chains and a string of pearls, she found the object of her search, a tiny silver cross, given to her when she was a little girl by her grandmother. She had never worn it, but she put it around her neck now. Then she began to undress. Removing her white nylon pants, she put on her flannel nightgown, rearranged the blankets, and settled into her nest to read. Eventually she fell mid paragraph into a restless sleep.

The use of the cross as a religious symbol predates Christianity, going back as far as neolithic times. It was usually a glyph for the axe or hammer and, as such, signified power. To the Teutonic tribes of northern Europe, it represented the hammer of Thor. In the shamanistic tradition of Eurasia it was Skaldi's hammer, the sun's hammer. To the Varkela as "children of the night," the sun was viewed as an ancient enemy. For them the idea of a bright, sunny day had the same connotation as we might attribute to the phrase "dark of the moon." The sun hammer was regarded as a bad omen, as is echoed in the Varkela curses: "May the sun hammer smite thee," or

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"May the sun strike you blind." As a Christian symbol, the cross was supposed to ward off the devil, and so by converse logic the Varkela were regarded as "demonkind" because they avoided it.

That evening Myrna went early to the hospital. She went to the intensive care unit and inquired about the progress of her patient.

"He had a code 99 this morning, cardiac arrest," Rose reported. "They had to resuscitate him. Lucky they caught him when they did or he would have been gone."

Nervously Myrna entered the room and stood inside the doorway watching the figure on the bed. In her lab coat pocket she fingered her silver crucifix. He was sitting up in bed and he smiled when he recognized her.

"A person could get killed in a place like this," he said. "This morning when I was almost asleep, they came in and jolted me right out of it with that horrible shock machine."

"You're lucky," she said. "They could have decided you were dead and sent you to pathology for an autopsy. Then you would be all cut up and placed in little bottles by now."

"I see this age has its share of barbarous customs," he said.

Myrna took a step into the room, fumbling with the object in her pocket.

"You're a vampire, aren't you?" she said, stopping at what she hoped was a safe distance from the bed.

"I'm not a corpse come back to life, if that's what you mean," he said. "But I am Varkela, which is probably the source of all those silly legends."

Valance eyed her pocket mistrustfully, thinking it might contain a small hand pistol. When out-bloods began using the word "vampire" it usually meant trouble, and only a fool would stick around trying to argue about technical differences. Therefore he was quite relieved when she took a small crucifix out of her pocket and extended her arm triumphantly in his direction.

Aha, he thought, someone comes to smite me down with the sun's hammer. He decided to have a little fun with her. Shrinking down in the bed clothes and feigning terror, he watched as she advanced in somnambulistic grandeur. When she was within range and the little cross dangled in front of his nose, he reached out and took it from her hand. An impudent grin spread across his face.

"Thank you," he said, "but as you can see, I already have one," and he pulled at the chain around his neck, bringing his own hand-carved cross into view.

Crestfallen, Myrna sat down on the bed, her mouth gaping.

"Little blood-thief," he said, "if you only knew how funny you looked just then."

"But I thought..." she began.

"I can be a Christian like anyone else," he said.

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She didn't seem to hear him. She was still recovering from the shock.

"Hello," he waved a hand in front of her face. "You of all people don't have to be afraid of me. A wolf-minded girl can defend herself. I won't bite you or whatever it is you are afraid of."

He was glad when he saw the wolvish look return to her eyes, but now she regarded him with such a stern expression that he stopped smiling. She was angry with him.

"I suppose you think this is a soup kitchen, where you can come for a free meal," she said. "I work hard to cross-match blood for *sick* people. I'll have you know blood costs $60 a pint, if you're interested. If you're hungry, go find someone who's healthy and bite them on the neck!"

He felt ashamed to have taken blood without payment.

"You don't need to haggle the price of blood with me," he said. "I know it comes dear, and I will find some way to repay, but right now I need your help."

He began to explain to her about the war in 1845, about his work in the medical tent, and about his dearest friend Dr. Rimsky who lay dying in another time. He watched her face for signs of comprehension. At first she raised a cynical eyebrow at his outpouring, but he rushed onward with his story, hoping to convince her by his urgency if not with logic. Soon her skepticism was replaced by doubt. She began to ask questions and to demand explanations on certain points. Eager to sway her his way, he supplied detail upon detail. Finally, as the torrent of his rhetoric abated, he thought he saw just the barest glimmer of belief in her eyes.

When he finished, Myrna was quiet for a moment. Then she said, "You know, you're not such a bad sort, and I'm half persuaded that you're telling the truth, but you make a horrible first impression. If you wanted my help, why didn't you ask me, instead of going through all that stupid "come to me" business? You scared me half to death."

"I'm sorry about that," he said. "I was only thinking of myself. You see, I have not shared blood-love with anyone for a long time and your response was so typically Varkela, that I forgot for a moment that you are an out-blood and do not understand. Most of humankind cannot resist the "call" and will come to us when summoned, but those who resist, the wolf-minded ones, are those we prefer to mate with, for they usually have some Varkela ancestry. But there are also wolf-minded out-bloods here and there, and we also marry with them, because full-blood Varkela women are subject to an illness, and thus are very rare."

"It must be a sex-linked genetic defect," said Myrna.

"A what?"

"Never mind," she said. "Listen, if I'm going to help you, we're going to

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have to get you out of this place. Otherwise they'll keep trying to start your heart every morning, and you'll never get any rest."

"That's not the only thing," said Valance. "These doctors think I'm human. They are planning to transfuse me again tonight to raise my what-you-call-it."

"Hematocrit."

"Right. But I'm Varkela and don't need as much. It would be a waste of good blood and might even make me ill."

"I saw your chart and your 'crit is only 18. No doctor is going to sign your release," she said. "I can get your clothes from admitting and you can come and stay at my place for a while, but I don't know how to smuggle you past the nurses' station."

"That's no problem to me," he said, and so saying, he concentrated for a few minutes, and his image faded from view. Then he was back again. "I would have done it sooner, but I had no place to go."

"I have to go to work now," said Myrna, checking her watch. "But if you can slip past the nurses and meet me down at the lab, I'll have your things. I can teach you about transfusion, and maybe we can rig up a sort of cross match that would work back in 1845.

About 2:30 a.m. Ernie, the security guard, came by the lab to tell Myrna that one of the patients was missing from the ICU and that she should keep an eye out for him. After he left, Valance materialized behind the filing cabinet.

"I wish I knew that trick," said Myrna. "I'd vanish every time my supervisor came around with a stool specimen to analyze."

"It's merely an illusion of the dreamwalk," he said. "One shouldn't do it too often. It expends a frightful lot of energy."

Myrna seated Valance at the lab bench and prepared to teach him immuno-hematology.

"The four major blood groups, A, B, AB, and O, are probably what you are able to distinguish by taste," she said. "We differentiate them by adding typing sera to the blood specimen." She showed him how the blue serum precipitated group A; the yellow, group B. For type AB, both the blue and the yellow serum precipitated, and for type O, neither of them did.

"The next thing you have to worry about are antibodies," she said. "A person with type A has anti-B antibodies in his or her serum, which is why you can't give type-B blood to a type-A person. A type-B person has Anti-A; therefore, you can't give type-A to a B person. A type-O person has both Anti-A and Anti-B; therefore, you can't give type A or B to an O person; but type O is sometimes called the "universal donor" because you can give it to type A, B, and AB persons

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because they don't have an Anti-O in their serum."

"Now you've got me really confused," said Valance. "I'll never be able to remember all that."

"You won't have to," said Myrna, "because I am going to teach you a simple crossmatch technique, which should rule out some of the dangers." She then took two different blood specimens and separated the serum from the cells. Next, using a porcelain slide, she mixed the donor cells with the patient serum on one side, and the patient cells with the donor serum on the other.

"If either mixture reacts, then you know that the donor is the wrong blood type, or that he has an antibody against the patient, making an incompatible crossmatch."

She showed Valance how to let the blood clot and take off the serum, and how to mix serum and cells on the slide to make what she called a "major" and a "minor" crossmatch.

"It's not perfect," said Myrna, "but it will pick out a few antibodies and prevent errors in typing."

Most of the rest of the night they talked about blood and transfusions and antibodies. She asked him how drinking the blood could raise his hematocrit, and he explained that the blood didn't go into his stomach, but that most went through valves in his hollow teeth and directly into his bloodstream. The serum antibodies were apparently filtered out somewhere in the process. She theorized that he probably had a deficiency of rubriblasts in his bone marrow, which caused the blood-need he felt from time to time. She was surprised to discover that a "vampire" needed only two pints of blood in the course of a month and could subsist on small amounts taken from many healthy, sleeping donors. Valance revealed that he had two kinds of saliva: from the lower gland, a rapid clotting agent, and from the upper gland, an anticoagulant. Myrna was fascinated and asked if she could take samples.

"You're as bad as Dr. Rimsky," said Valance. "He experiments with my spit on men, rats, and horses. I've spent hours drooling into bottles for the furtherance of science."

Valance noticed that during their long conversation, she seemed to avoid any topics of a personal nature. There was a certain aloofness or distance that she tried to maintain. And he was reminded of how he had been after Favarka's death, the withdrawal from life and the inward nursing of pain. He was not sure how to broach the subject. So he decided on the bold, blunt approach.

"Have you ever loved anyone, Myrna?" he asked.

She pondered this for a long time and then answered:

"Yes, once a long time ago."

"And he hurt you?" asked Valance gently.

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"How did you know?"

"I don't know, I just sense it," he said.

There was a long silence, punctuated by the clicking of the peristaltic pump on the autoanalyser and the ringing of a distant telephone.

Finally he said, "And you've never allowed yourself to love anyone since." It was a statement of fact, not a question.

"Does that show too?" she asked defensively.

"It does," he said. "Don't you know that if you refuse to love, the wound may heal over on the surface, but inside an abcess grows, poisoning you from within?"

"Love is an illusion," said Myrna. "Two people come together to satisfy their own needs. The secret lies in not caring too much. That way you don't get hurt when they leave you."

He knew that this cynical answer was just her defense against deeper feelings, but it angered him, moving him to say:

"But in that way you defeat your own purpose. You hurt people and use them and drive them away. Don't you see that if you continue in that way, you will become more of a vampire than I am?"

He saw a flash of anger in her eyes, and then she looked away, biting her lower lip. He saw that his words had had an effect: she wept silently.

Well and good, he thought, she will learn to care again. He reached out and put an arm around her shoulders.

"Heal thee, heal thee," he said after the custom of his people.

When she had dried her eyes and regained some of her composure, she said, "It's not fair of you to knock down a person's defenses like that."

"It's fair if my intentions are honorable, which they are," he said.

She had to laugh at "honorable intentions."

"Now I really believe you are from the 19th century," she said. "Welcome to the age of noncommitment, Valance."

At 8:00 a.m. Myrna took him home with her. At first he balked at the "horseless carriage," her Volkswagen Superbeetle, but she finally persuaded him to get into the metal contraption. At her apartment she prepared him a place to sleep on cushions on the living room floor. Then she went to take her own daytime rest.

She awoke to hear music. He had found her old guitar and had retuned it to resemble some instrument familiar to him. He strummed a minor chord and sang in his own language. It had the sound of cold wind howling across open plains.

"What is that you're singing?" she asked.

He translated for her:

"The dun mare has died,
"Little sister of the wind
"She wanders the pasture of the spirit world.

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"I hear her neigh sometimes
"When the north wind blows."

It moved her to confess to him. "I have a horse."

"Really?" he said. "You must take me out to meet him tonight before I leave. But first I want to hear you sing for me."

She didn't like to think of his leaving. The more she got to know him, the more she felt he was the sort of man that she had always hoped to meet. She took the guitar from him and retuned it, and played an old Scottish ballad, a favorite of hers called "The Waters of Tyne."

"Oh, I cannot see my love if I would dee.
"The waters of Tyne stand between him and me.
"And here I must sit with a tear in my ee,
"All sighin' and sobbin' my true love to see."

Except that when she sang it her tongue stumbled so that it came out "the waters of time."

She took him out to the stable where she kept Shanty, her horse. Crickets were singing in the warm night, when they arrived, and Shanty trotted up to the fence to greet them, pushing his nose into Myrna's pocket to beg for sugar. Valance scratched Shanty's neck and then bent, sliding his hand down a fore leg to check the hoof.

"You'd better be careful. He's fussy about his feet," warned Myrna. She thought of the farrier, whom Shanty had chased out of the barn. The man refused to go near Shanty now unless the horse were hobbled.

Shanty, however, made no trouble, and at a soft-spoken word picked up his feet and allowed them to be examined.

"He isn't usually like this with strangers," said Myrna. "He's really taken to you."

Valance took hold of the horse's mane and vaulted up onto his back. Shanty made a half rear and pivoted, galloped to the far end of the field and came back at an easy lope. Valance bounced down next to her again.

"You can ride a strange horse without saddle or bridle!" exclaimed Myrna.

"Only to show off for you," he said. "Actually, I am not that good. Back home I could introduce you to some real riders. When you tell a Russian boy that he rides like a Cossack, he takes it as a compliment, but to Varkela it is an insult."

When they got back to the apartment they were hungry. Valance insisted on cooking for her.

"It is a custom of ours. I haven't prepared food for a woman in a long time. It would give me pleasure," he said.

They searched in the refrigerator and found lamb chops. Valance, as he

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set about to cook, consumed a quart of milk, explaining that on the steppes he had lived mostly on mare's milk. Myrna showed him how to work the electric stove and then found a snack for herself as she awaited the results of his experiment.

"What's that funny stuff you're eating?" he asked. "Surely that can't be good for you."

"Coca-Cola and potato chips. I eat them all the time."

"Ugh!" he said.

"What's wrong with it?" said Myrna, knowing full well but desiring to provoke him a little. They had been having little contests of the will all day. It was some sort of Varkela custom having to do with courtship or flirting.

"If you were my blood-love, I'd make you eat lots of green, leafy foods, bran meal, and meat," he said.

"Why?"

"So my love wouldn't weaken you, and your blood would grow back rich and strong. I'd not have it said that my woman faints. And of course you would have to eat lots of karacheer."

"What's that?"

"Jerked goat's liver."

"Blecchhh!"

"If you wouldn't, I'd force it down your throat!"

"The hell you would!" she said.

He engaged her eyes and tried to stare her down. She felt the force of his will as he tried to "Call" her to him. She thought a fierce, sharp thought that sent him reeling backward.

"Ow, you *are* wolf-minded. Now you've gone and given me a headache just as Favarka used to do."

It was fun, but it made him look at her throat with such longing.

"You will eventually yield to me, won't you?" he asked hopefully. "It's not fair for you to be so good at the teasing game if you don't intent to yield."

"Wait and see," she said. She seemed to have the upper hand and she was enjoying it.

After dinner she had to admit he was a very good cook.

His presence had stimulated Myrna into a lovely fantasy. She had an idea:

"I wish I could dreamwalk and go back with you. I think I'd like helping you in the medical tent. I know first aid and I could teach you a lot about modern medicine."

Valance was surprised. He had been wishing he had more time with her. Then perhaps it might have worked.

"We don't know each other well enough," he said. "To dreamwalk requires love and trust in your guide. It can be dangerous."

"We could at least try," she said.

He tried half-heartedly to disuade her. He really wished it could be so. Finally he agreed to try. He sat her in a chair and stared into her eyes, trying to put her into the proper trance. But she resisted. He could see that she didn't mean to, but she couldn't help it. The

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wolf in her that so strongly attracted him fought against him now.

"Keep trying," she insisted. "I feel something beginning to happen."

Carefully he tried to coax her soul into the void. Finally he seemed to be succeeding. She slumped forward in her chair.

Myrna found herself inside a long, dark tunnel. She moved toward gray light in the distance until she felt grass under her feet, and, looking up, she saw the night sky, a panoply of stars. In the distance a rider approached over the steppe. No sound came to her from the horse's hooves, only the small ringing of tiny bells. She could see the rider clearly now, outlined against the starry mist, a woman clad in baggy trousers wearing a fur cap. A loose Tartar jacket enclosed her arms, which held a small wolf cub. The sturdy horse of the steppes came to a halt before Myrna, shaking its mane with a sprinkle of wind chimes. The fierce, dark-eyed woman offered the cub to Myrna, who cradled it in her arms. No word was spoken. The rider spurred her mount and cantered away, making no sound except the jingle of tiny bells.

Myrna looked at the small wolf and thought she saw sentience begin to glow redly in the depth of its eyes. Abruptly its countenance changed so that it was no longer a cub, but the wizened face of a small demon.

"Are you then one of the chosen?" it asked of her.

Myrna screamed and flung down the cub. Where it fell the ground split open in a great rent. Something made a scratchy noise deep in the dark hole, and then Myrna saw it, a giant centipede-like creature with many-jointed legs. It began to come toward her. She turned and fled. As she ran, she could hear the gnashing of chitinous jaws just behind her. Then she was in the tunnel again, which seemed to wind on forever as the thing gained on her. Just as a whip-like antenna snaked out to touch her shoulder, she woke up sobbing in Valance's arms.

"I was afraid of something like this," he said. "Where did you go? I couldn't find you."

She told him about the dream as he held her close, comforting her.

"You have seen the ghost-soul of my mother, Odakai," said Valance, "but what it means, I do not know."

He lifted and carried her into the bedroom, and, setting her gently on the bed, he lay down beside her.

She had avoided any affectionate gestures from him all day, being both attracted and repelled by his vampire nature. But now, partly because she was upset, and partly because he would be leaving soon, she pressed closer in his arms.

"If you yield to me now," he said, "I will make your blood to sing."

She could feel his breath on her neck and she braced herself for what she knew must come next. But he didn't bite. He kissed her tenderly, and

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then he was kissing her mouth and her nose and her eyes and carefully undressing her.

"Why you're tattooed!" she said, when he took off his shirt.

She traced with her finger where a stag raced across his chest.

"It's my soul-beast," he told her.

They played at love for a long time. He was gentle, teasing, the most sensitive lover she had ever known.

Valance, when he saw the soft fur of her bosom, made a little cry of joy. This and her scent proved to him that she was one of his own kind, and he banished his Christian conscience to a remote corner of his mind where it could not touch him.

When he finally pulled her over on top of him and entered her, she was so close that she could hardly contain it, but he sensed this and stopped, then brought her close to the knife's edge several times before allowing her to finish. And her blood sang, pulsing in her ears, a song of the open steppes. As she lay satiated on top of him, he sought the jugular vein in her throat and bit deeply. She didn't really mind. She felt so warm and sleepy that she was content to lie there and enjoy the intimacy of it. When he finished, he licked the wound clean with his pink dog-like tongue, and Myrna, having recovered, reached up and nipped him playfully in the throat.

"My poor little wolf with no teeth," he said. "I must help you." And he turned his head and bit his own shoulder so that the blood flowed.

"I share myself with you," he said.

She looked at the red trickle. She knew what he wanted her to do, but she didn't want to do it. So she just stared down at him.

"You reject me then?" he said with such soft, wounded eyes that she couldn't refuse him. She pressed her lips to the small cut and drank a little of the warm liquid. The taste of his blood awoke in her some ancient need and she continued to drink until it was satisfied. For an instant it seemed as if she saw herself through his eyes. The moment passed and she was aware that he looked at her intently.

"Our souls have touched," he said.

They lay together a long time without talking.

Valance's conscience uncoiled from where it lay sleeping like a dormant asp and bit him.

"I have sinned and must repent," he said. "The Christians have such strange rules about love."

Then he looked at her and brushed back her hair to kiss her forehead. "And yet I don't think God would begrudge me to share blood-love with you," he said, "because it's such a comfort, and doesn't the Bible say, 'Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people, saith the Lord'?"

Myrna laughed.

"Have I made a joke?" he asked.

"Sort of," she said. "That's the first time I ever heard anyone quote the Bi-

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ble to justify fornication."

Hurt, he rolled away from her, pulling the pillow down over his head.

"You make it sound like something people write on the wall of a latrine," he said.

Myrna pulled the pillow away and was going to clout him with it, when she saw that although his eyes were tightly closed, a tear wet the lashes.

"Hey, I'm sorry," she said. "I was only teasing you."

"It's nothing," he said. "Just my romantic nature showing. I'd hoped we could call it love, not fornication. But I know it's much too soon to know."

He was silent for a moment and then he said, "Do you know why it's so difficult for you to love, Myrna?"

"No," she said honestly, almost guiltily. "I thought it was because I'd been hurt once, but I know it goes much deeper than that."

"It's because the wolvish soul builds trust slowly," he said. "It rejects all but those who persistently continue to take the risk of courting it. It may be befriended, never tamed."

Myrna felt that, for the first time, someone had really understood her nature. It seemed impossible that he could be leaving.

"I wish we had more time," she said.

"So do I," he said, "but perhaps we may meet again someday. I think that dream you had gives us cause for hope. It may mean that Odakai accepts you, but you are just not ready yet."

They held each other for a long time in the dark, saying nothing.

From somewhere in the room, Myrna seemed to hear a faraway voice, singing in an unknown language, his language.

"I must leave you now," he said.

"I wish I could go with you," she said, "but if wishes were horses, then beggars would ride."

He didn't understand the English proverb, and she had to explain to him that back in the 17th century only those with enough money could afford a horse.

"If sounds funny to me," he said, "because where I come from even the beggars ride. I'll change the saying around and give you my blessing as a parting gift. May your wishes be horses, Myrna, and carry you wherever you desire to go."

"May your wishes be horses," she said. "I like the sound of that."

He gave her a parting kiss and an affectionate little nip on the neck, and then he was gone.

IV.

In 1845 it was raining. Valance slogged back toward camp in the evening drizzle. On the way to the medical tent, he passed the cook's station. Old, fat Temboyov was boiling a vat of some kind of lumpy gray porridge and bragging to a new recruit about how he'd looted a set of porcelain tea cups. Valance surreptitiously relieved him of a few of the saucers.

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The crossmatch worked just as she said it would. He was able to rule out any incompatible donors by watching for red clumps against the white porcelain background. The transfusion was a success, and Dr. Rimsky was up and around on the third day. Valance moved back into the medical tent, after spending two days sleeping in a hollow tree.

"I'm relieved to see that you are not slinking into camp looking like a drowned rat anymore," said Rimsky. "But why didn't you just take to your bed and claim illness? I would have thought up some way to cover for you."

"Because no one would believe me," said Valance. "I look healthier than the lot of you."

It was true. His complexion was almost rosy. Thanks to the transfusion in Myrna's hospital, Valance was in better health than he'd been in a long time.

"What's that tune you keep humming?" asked Dr. Rimsky one night as they worked together in the tent.

"I think it's called 'The Waters of Time,'" answered Valance a little sadly.

V.

Externally Myrna's life did not change much after Valance left. Work was still a series of frantic rush orders interspersed with periods of boredom. She brought a book on Russian history to the hospital to read when she wasn't needed.

Shanty still moved his big feet with the grace of a fairy dancer, and she won another blue ribbon at the shows. But he could not carry her to the place she really desired to go. One Saturday afternoon as she brushed the saddle marks out of his hair, she pressed her face into his neck and wet his mane with tears. It was then that she heard him make the little noise in the throat, as horses do when they wish to express sympathy, and she realized she had allowed herself to love again.

That night when she went to sleep, she dreamed that she walked through a long, dark tunnel. She came out into a large grassy place under a starry night sky. A horse and rider approached, making no sound except the jingling of faint harness bells. As the figure drew closer, Myrna recognized the Cossack woman who carried the wolf cub. The dark-eyed woman stopped her horse and offered the cub to Myrna, who took it and held it close to her heart. The woman pointed to a rutted wagon road, then turned her horse and rode away making no noise of hooves but only the ringing of tiny bells.

Myrna followed the road indicated until she came to a wagon parked by the roadside. A man was just climbing up to the driver's seat. Myrna put the cub on the wagon bed and boosted herself up. There were men, some lying, some sitting up, in the wagon. The

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man nearest her was crudely bandaged about the head and he muttered softly to himself. The driver clucked to the horses and the wagon creaked on its way. Myrna tucked the small wolf under the light flannel she was wearing. She felt its cold nose against her bare breasts. It was getting colder, so she moved closer to the man and placed her back against the side of the wagon. They lurched along until the road turned in at a large tent. Horses were tethered in a small grove of oak trees, and there was a fire a little ways from the tent. The driver pulled up and said something in Russian. A sturdy, gray-haired man with a bandaged arm came out of the tent and spoke to the driver, who climbed down from his seat.

Myrna reached for the wolf cub and found it was missing. She looked down the front of her flannel gown and saw that in the hollow between her breasts, her little patch of gray fur was denser. Before she had time to think about this, she heard a voice she recognized from inside the tent. She jumped down from the wagon, and, ignoring the gray-haired man who spoke to her, ducked under the flap and entered.

Inside, in the lantern light, she saw him, with his back toward her, bending over a patient. He turned to look her way and his mouth fell open in astonishment so that his blood teeth showed.

"Myrna!" he cried, and stepping around a cot, he hugged her to his white, blood-stained apron, then held her back to look at her.

"Like all dreamwalkers, you have come ill-prepared," he said, plucking at her flannel night gown. "And barefoot too."

She looked down past her ruffled hem to where her bare toes peeked out. He rummaged in a corner of the tent and tossed her a wool shirt, a pair of trousers and two heavy-knit woolen socks.

"This will have to do for now," he said. "We have incoming wounded and I have work to do." He was already busy with scissors, cutting back the sleeve of a soldier's uniform.

Myrna saw his surgical tools — forceps, scalpels, needles — all lying in neat order on a dirty piece of linen.

"You could stand to learn a few things about asepsis," she said, and made a mental note that she would have to teach him sterile technique. She hunted until she found a pot and water to boil, and took it out to put on the fire. Then she returned to where Valance bent over his patient, speaking soothing Russian phrases, as he pried at a musket ball in the ragged flesh. She found the bandaging cloth and made ready to assist him.

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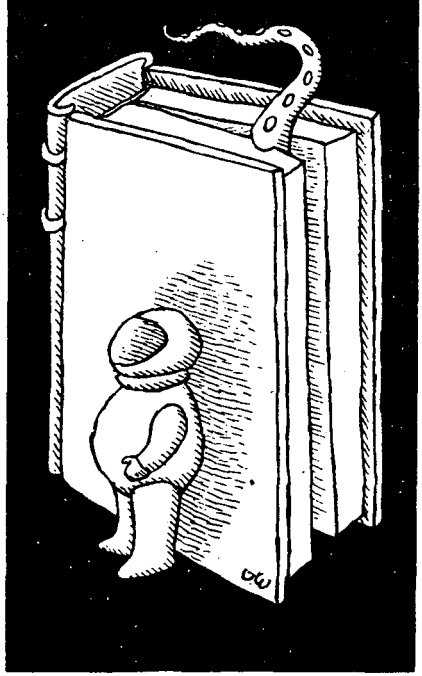
Books

ALGIS BUDRYS



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

The Science Fiction Hall of Fame III, Clarke & Proctor, Editors; Avon, $3.95.

Madwand, Roger Zelazny, Ace, $6.95.

Beauty, Robin McKinley, Pocket, $1.95.

Sandkings, George R.R. Martin, Timescape, $2.75.

Soldier Boy, Michael Shaara, Timescape (no price given).

NOTED:

The Lost and the Lurking, Manly Wade Wellman, Doubleday, $10.95.

Well, now; as I write this, it's approximately Christmas. You're reading this as the buds are bursting out of bushes and the trilling brooklet rushes, la, la, la, la, but never mind. My thoughts are full of goodies under the tree where, here in the Chicago environs, we never believe in Spring until we see it.

This sort of chronoclasm is of course normal to writers for what we call "long-lead" publications. Publishers, desirous of seeing some sort of correspondence between the review date and the publication date, often furnish us highly influential types with advance material — unbound galley proofs, bound galley proofs, and sometimes even special advance editions never meant to see the light of day in stores.

Of course, all these creations bear stern warnings not to quote anything without checking first, as something might change at the last moment. Hah! Did you ever try calling a publishing

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house and getting someone to disclose some hard facts about a forthcoming title?

Some of them lie outright, some of them make sincere errors, some of them have switchboard operators who don't know they have a public relations department, and in at least one memorable case, not too long ago, Simon & Schuster's PR department flatly denied S&S published any science fiction or had any plans to do so. At long distance phone rates, that's not as funny as it might otherwise be.

Also, of course, some publishers don't send out advance material, and some claim to but send it after the book has gone on sale. Accordingly, since few reviewers will pass up the opportunity to discuss a book about which they might say something brilliant, many review columns deal, cheek to cheek with titles that went off sale weeks ago, titles that are on sale simultaneously with the column, and, in some cases, titles that were supposed to be out but were later postponed. This column is certainly no exception. I don't know what to do about it.

So, getting back to goodies under the tree, here are my thoughts on a range of books, piled up beside my typewriter in one stack, which if viewed chronologically would be scattered across a rather broad spectrum, some still in pristine wrappings, others barely peeping out from under a welter of torn cardboard and crumpled ribband.

***

The most impressive new book here is Avon's *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame III*, an astonishing bargain at $3.95, containing the short story, novelet and novella Nebula winners for 1965 through 1969. Fifteen pieces in all, by the great names of that time, and in some cases of times longer than that: Ellison, Aldiss, Zelazny, McKenna, Dickson, Vance, Delany, Leiber, Moorcock, Wilhelm, Richard Wilson, McCaffrey, and Silverberg, some of them more than once.

There is also a sapient introduction by Arthur C. Clarke (who shares editorial credit with George W. Proctor). In it, Clarke with good humor and real perception makes the point that while no award is unchallengeable — or, I would add, in some cases even defensible — yet there genuinely is a rough justice and a general benefit to it all.

The contents bear him out. There are some powerful and memorable stories here, including the best story Dick Wilson has written to date. Its presence alone illustrates that fact that awards don't always go only to the obvious names, and that there may be something to merit.

One does raise an eyebrow at this book's being packaged in this manner. The two previous *Hall of Fame* books (*HoF* II came in two volumes) reprinted short stories and novelets from pre-Nebula days. And there is an ongoing series of annual Nebula anthologies. So, technically, this is a book which tries to wedge into a nonexistent slot.

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But, frankly, I don't care. Under whatever guise, here's one of the rare basic anthologies for your short shelf.

Among trade paperbacks there's Roger Zelazny's *Madwand*, illustrated by Judy King Rieniets. It has just appeared at this writing and so ought to be coming down the pike as a racksize book in the foreseeable future. I don't know how the illustrations will fare when reduced; Rieniets is a delicate as well as an indefatigable renderer whose strength is in her decorative style, so if you're a fantasy graphics fan, this is clearly the edition for you.

The text — not as replete with typoes as most Ace books, but still well within Ace's claim to the worst proofreading among major SF houses — is a sequel to Zelazny's *Changeling*. That book, as you may recall, was a swift-moving fantasy adventure novella, and my chief complaint with it was that it read like a cut version of the novel it might have been. *Madwand* is another sort of fantasy entirely, its mood and technique far more Gothic. Although it shares many characters and milieux with *Changeling*, it evokes the feeling that some other writer has taken over the series, much as Manly Wade Wellman became Brett Sterling and did *Captain Future* after Edmond Hamilton went to World War II.

Taken as a book with spiritual debts to H.P. Lovecraft's spiritual creditors, *Madwand* is not bad, and there is clearly a sequel in the works. But it isn't all that good, either; disjointed, and anticlimactic, and in places woefuly overwritten, it pushes the story of Pol Detson onward toward some final — and I fear rather conventional — resolution.

Detson, you may recall, was a wizard's child exchanged at birth for the son of an engineer, and raised on the Earth of our time while his opposite number proceeded to scandalize and finally ravage the magical world in which Detson belonged.

But all that was pretty much concluded in the earlier volume. So Detson has become just another apprentice wizard, now that he's back where he belongs, and though he may become a very powerful wizard indeed, there is little sign that he will be essentially different from any one of a hundred other fictional wizards.

It's become almost mandatory, within the SF community of letters, to wonder aloud what's gotten into Zelazny since the days when he was writing "A Rose for Ecclesiastes" and "The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth," both of which appear in new anthologies with great frequency. This sort of thing is a bad thing to do to a writer. It is an attempt to make a creative talent grow only in foreseeable directions, and reflects an unseemly arrogance in the critic.

But something most assuredly *has* gotten into Zelazny, and from here it does look like less command of the craft rather than more. *Changeling*,

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like a few other Zelazny creations over the past ten years, showed flashes of the extraordinary, and in that sense was reminiscent of the days when each new Zelazny story was like nothing that had been done before. And there are a few such flashes in *Madwand*, as well. I'm not concerned that they are not the same sort of flash as those in *Changeling*. It is true, however, that there are fewer of them.

Pocket has reprinted Robin McKinley's *Beauty*, a retelling of "Beauty and The Beast" which does not so much flesh out the classic story as add to it a plausible if somewhat anachronized background. A first novel, *Beauty* in its opening chapters shows both the charm and the tendency to hand-wringer plotting of other books written by people who have read heavily in nineteenth century literature. In its closing scenes, it rings down the curtain rather hastily after announcing the troubles are over, rather than showing them resolved for some visible reason. But all this is to make less of a good book than has been made of it by a cult readership which calls it a great one.

Peter S. Beagle is quoted on the cover as having been moved and enchanted. For once, I find myself in substantial agreement with a cover quote. I was not moved to transports, nor was the enchantment a dazzling one. But as gentle fantasies go, *Beauty* is a warm and essentially innocent spell of quiet reading; a book whose author clearly had a defined idea of what beauty is, and set out to evoke it. That is not a mean ambition, nor did McKinley ever adandon it. Worse could be said about an author and her work; much more worse than better.

Speaking of Manly Wade Wellman, his third Silver John novel, *The Lost and the Lurking*, sits here bearing a December 11 publication date. It came in the mail yesterday — December 8 — and so, all I can say to those of you who admire and seek after this author's work is that you had better get to seeking at a great rate, and the second-hand shops are a better bet; Doubleday often chops off its books at the root as soon as the salesmen have filled the pre-publication orders.

I have not had time to read it; the choice is between discussing it badly and simply telling you it's there. (The choice of waiting 'til next time is clearly invalid, to cite the circumstances detailed above). But we all know Wellman for the artist he is, we know Silver John, and there can be no question that the book deserves your attention.

Sandkings is a collection of seven George R.R. Martin novellas from the latter half of the 1970s, an extraordinarily prolific period in this writer's career.

In a way — in a way — Martin duplicated Zelazny's rapid rise to prominence with a series of highly praised

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stories. They are not much the same sort of author in other respects, since they share the hallmark of individuality. They also share the problem of having to produce encores to notable opening performances, while conscious of the fact that many a writer has failed to grow beyond his first successes.*

Martin's title story, from a 1979 *Omni*, illustrates something of this. Like most Martin stories, it is essentially a tale of morality, told with its focus on the individual who has it wrong. It also displays Martin's basic predilection for kinds of zoological nastiness that haven't been felt much on our skins since *Weird Tales*. The latter was a journal, I submit, which could have made Martin the new Lovecraft, had conditions been just a bit different.

What "Sandkings" has that is different from the earlier Martin is a remarkably subtle piece of plotwork toward the end. It may be hard to see, since the story on its surface, and especially in the surface events of the ending, appears unusually conventional and predictable. But plots that tapered off toward the end were a consistent feature of Martin's work for a long time, and to see him grappling with that weakness is to see someone who has not given up growing. Apart from the fact that it produces a more satisfactory reading experience.

In addition to "Sandkings," *Sandkings* contains such other stories as "Bitterblooms," "In the House of the Worm," "Starlady" and "The Stone City" from media of somewhat limited distribution, as well as "The Way of Cross and Dragon," again from *Omni;* you may not have seen or heard of more than a few of them. They vary as stories, but each contains something highly memorable, and most of them amply substantiate Martin's high reputation.

Michael Shaara sold his first story, to *Astounding*, in May, 1951. An outstanding member of the group of young lions represented by the then Frederik Pohl Literary Agency, he was then gravitated to *Galaxy* under H.L. Gold's editorship, although two of the stories in *Soldier Boy* are from F&SF. *Soldier Boy*, as you may have guessed, is the first SF collection from Shaara, who never truly wrote for a living, did, however, sell extensively to *Redbook* after getting out of the pulps, has since won a Pulitzer for his Civil War novel, *Killer Angels*, and has an SF novel upcoming.

In the early 1950s — which is when most of the stories here were first published — Shaara was one of the people who, in their early twenties, were entering the field as nontechnological writers who had nevertheless been heavily influenced by *Astound-*

Contrary to popular belief, few writers are so fortunate as to simply transcribe what the Muses bring them entire. I believe Mickey Spillane does; perhaps one or two others.

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ing during their formative years. What this meant was that they had taken a great many Humanities courses in college, and some formal courses in Creative Writing,* unlike the *echt*-Campbellian writers who influenced them. But when they wrote, it was in the representational prose so favored by ASF. "Illustrative word-painting" is a way of describing it, if one assumes that the purpose of painting is to produce something like an enhanced photograph a la Norman Rockwell.

You will see strong tendencies toward that in the *Soldier Boy* stories. Paradoxically, many of us soon found we had less acceptance from Campbell than we had hoped for, only to find that two or three years of Horace Gold's crotchets was about all we could take, especially with rates in the field what they were. (I traveled the ASF road for a number of years, but that was an exception among members of the "Class of 1951;" certainly, I, too, was often gored by the fact that if a story didn't sell for 3¢ per word, it sold for a penny or less, often collectible with difficulty).

But whether it was Campbell or Gold we dealt with in our first few years, the tendency was toward literal unfolding of some SF proposition. Robert Sheckley, to cite one apparent exception, could not have satirized that mode as consistently as he did without having it in his bones, and he had as a preceptor William Tenn, who had done essentially the same thing a few years sooner.

I remember Shaara — forgive me if I maunder here; my fifty-first birthday will have passed by the time you read this — as someone who impressed me very much. I did not know him in great detail — he was a better acquaintance of Sheckley's — but I knew him. We did, I think, all believe that we were quite promising. Not that we were finished craftsmen, or that the work we were doing was more than preparation for the really good work to come. But we believed we knew what the direction was and felt, like the molecules just behind the metal of the cutting edge, that our stewardship of what was best in SF would arrive after just a few more honings.

Well, for one reason or another, that didn't happen, although it nearly did in some cases. But the feeling can be seen in this collection, and it is still clearly to be found in the book's Introduction and Afterword, in which Shaara looks back on that work with evident joy and a sureness of its worth.

A few of the stories here are relatively recent; one or two are not SF. The best of them all, I think, is "Death of a Hunter," from *Fantastic Universe*, a salvage market.

There may be some significance in the fact that neither *Galaxy* nor ASF

I see a distinction between a course which encourages creative writing and the average college Creative Writing course, which teaches one how to build a rep in Creative Writing classes.

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VOLUME II IN THE SAGA OF PLIOCENE EXILE

THE GOLDEN TORC

JULIAN MAY

AUTHOR OF THE MANY-COLORED LAND

"For those like myself who considered *The Many-Colored Land* an instant classic, there was considerable suspense engendered by the wait for the second book of the trilogy. I am more than happy to be able to say that *The Golden Torc* is a worthy successor. I read it with the same avid excitement I felt from *Land*, and I finished it with the same craving for more. The entire concept is outrageously original . . . [and] it all comes to a climax that, to say the very least, is Wagnerian in scale. After that finale, how can May top it?"

— Baird Searles in *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*

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published it; like ASF, F&SF sent it back to the author without comment, and he sold it to FU for $75 and all the idiosyncratic copyediting he could eat. But I don't know what that significance might be. The story is not offensive in any way, even by mid-'50s standards, even on the level of saying something outrageously true. It is simply a tale of adventure, gently enveighing against genocidal chauvinism and corporate greed — hardly taboo topics even then. What it does do, though, is present its situation with the literalism of an enhanced photograph, and that may have made it a little too real.

I think about that. Many of today's young writers would have done it differently. ("I'll never sleep with you again, you fucking bastard, because you hunt intelligent beings!" "Jesus, Honey, now that you make me think about it, I guess I have been a shithead. Look, I'll go off and agonize for a while, and we can fuck again in the last chapter, O.K.?") They would have made it, in other words, not only an indictment but a manifesto, and manifested it.

Shaara was an ex-cop. Another story here, "The Peeping Tom Patrol," evokes that experience through *Playboy's* eyes. Perhaps he had a pretty good idea of what realism is, although, as with almost every SF writer prior to the New Wave, everything we did was overlaid with one form or another of Romantic signature. (Funny; Sheckley had been shot at as a garrison soldier in

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pre-Police Action Korea; I was a refund claims investigations clerk for American Express while writing the first stories I would ever sell; why did we fall so readily into simplified notions of human character?) Whatever, to find all these stories here in one package is to contemplate a slice of time.

I rather think that viewed by a fairly recent reader of SF, these stories will be tinged by an "old-fashioned" flavor. I had read all of the SF as it appeared; not so with the 'straight' fiction, and "Come to my Party," a dying-fighter yarn from a T&A magazine of the 1950s, is clearly from a genre that went out with John Garfield. Perhaps something of the sort is true of the SF, as well, and what I am reading now is not so much fiction as it is memories. (I say that because it strikes me as a logical possibility, not because I believe it to be more than negligibly true).

Let me also point out that those with a scholarly interest in SF have to have this book, along with those who have a scholarly interest in Pulitzer-winning authors. But apart from that; few now remember Shaara, except as a footnote, in the field where once he commanded significant attention over a longish term, from the top publications of their day. It was felt then, by people with documented good judgement, that readers would consider this high-quality work. Readers have changed since then, some say; I wonder if they have actually changed as much as SF claims it has.

I think it would not hurt you to find out.

I would guess the price of the experience to be in the range of $2.25. Timescape furnished me with a Xeroxed manuscript, followed by a bound advance galley; nowhere in that bundle, which includes two personal letters from Timescape editors, is there a mention of the price. And I am tired of calling New York for such information. The scheduled publication date is March, 1982, and I presume they got that part O.K. If they didn't, please disregard previous wistfulness.

The CLARION WORKSHOP in Science Fiction and Fantasy Writing will be held at Michigan State University from June 27 through August 7, 1982. Writers in residence will be Algis Budrys, Marta Randall, Samuel R. Delany, Orson Scott Card, Kate Wilhelm and Damon Knight. Address inquiries to Dr. Leonard Isaacs, Lyman Briggs School, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824.

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Steve Vance is 29, lives in Georgia and has sold several short stories and three SF novels, PLANET OF THE GAWFS, THE REALITY WEAVERS, and ALL THE SHATTERED WORLDS. Here, he offers a fast, actionful tale about the adventures of a crew of spacers on a truly off-trail resort planet known as Dugan's World.

Last Night On Dugan's World

BY
STEVE VANCE

It had been a long eight weeks out when we hit dirt at the Hudspith-Prostoke Base, and if the other sixteen crewmembers were as festered as me (and they were), we made a pretty scraggy bunch for the neighboring town to withstand all at once. The jump had not been a career highlight as far as anyone was concerned, since we'd been out of effective contact for ninety percent of it; our cargo consisted of nothing more stimulating than a batch of eighty-year-old films and one Masterservice News reporter bound for a typical "spaceman's log" story; and, to top it all, Pulaski had scoped a floater two-thirds of the way into the trip.

At first the readings had broadcast only the existence of a 1.8 meter by 0.459 meter by 0.299 meter nonmetallic object. So the Cap had keeled enough to scoop it up — certainly not out of any feeling of duty to the law, but for possible salvage rights. By the time he discovered it to be a man's body, Elatt had fed the pickup point into the ship's log, making it too late to chug along uninvolved.

The man was long dead, as we had known he would be after Pulaski's probe showed no vital traces in the floating object, and there was no hope of identifying him, because he had on nothing but jockey shorts under his flashy red Starwear pressure suit. He had committed suicide. Probably after drifting for days out there in the darkness between the suns with a dead radio, he had dialed open his faceplate to make it quicker. Who he was and how he got stranded in deep space would have to wait for civil investigation, since our computer showed no wrecks or disappearances in that area for eighteen years, and the Cap stowed

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him in an aft vacuum storage slot.

Snuff Wilkes, one of the *old* void vets, went slightly dotto when the corpse was hauled aboard, however, and began raving about migrating evils, curses, and omens. When the Cap refused to reroute around Dugan's World, the bird even volunteered to be cast adrift in a lifeship with enough thrust to carry it into some active lanes, but that was naturally vetoed, and the medical quarters had another guinea pig until he begged his way out after three days.

Of course, I certainly wasn't bored during the countless duty hours surrounding the stiff pickup. No, I had all manner of mental and emotional fulfillment while monitoring kinetic piles and running scrubbots and rewiring shorted-out lavatories and all of the other glamorous duties that had lured me into merchant service in the first place. I did watch a few of the old films, but they were from the 1960's and '70's and not even the good ones, at that (damn, what I wouldn't have given for a *Blazing Saddles* or *Hard Times*).

So you can appreciate my spiritual disposition when we hit Dugan's, an off-trail resort that was socially *vox populi* with the ReCon set. Our touchdown came at four p.m., local time, and it was almost eight before we maneuvered our wares out of the hold and into the appropriate dispersion lots; I had myself cleaned and pressed in just under ten minutes, which left me forty-three hours to reduce Hudspith to a mere smoking parody of its former glory.

Even an afternoon of muscling around hovercraft and being the "quaint" object of the attention of the passing upper crust with their reconstructed bodies and protracted lifespans (I started to feel like a Bolshevik peasant in 1917 Russia) couldn't spray down my anticipation concerning the adjoining evening.

Naturally, one doesn't tackle the job of metropolis-razing alone. So when I finally managed to convince the Cap that Snuff Wilkes could replace me on tank scrub that evening — since the old coot had sworn a sacred vow not to leave the ship while it sat on Dugan's World — I marched down the ramp to find nearly half of the crew waiting for me in a comandeered compbus.

"The prisoner escapes to join his fellow fugitives in an evening of platonic pleasures," Garvin Plegge called out to me. "I told you he would worm out of his rightful ship duty, P.J. So be a good boy and pay up."

As I got on the bus, I saw P.J. Norwich digging a couple of notes out of his jeans while exhibiting an expression that would have done credit to the last victim of de Torquemada. "What did it for you, Oliver, the left hook or the right to the short ribs?" he asked in a less than courteous tone.

P.J.'s my kid brother, and along

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with our cousin Garvin ("*Second* cousin," he's quick to point out) we signed up for merchant marine service a year ago in a sort of grand, Three Musketeerish gesture. Hell, we were just stupid kids — Gar and I were thirty-six, P.J. four years younger — and we would have done next to anything to get off of Euphrosyne, where we had all first seen light.

"What left hook?" I responded. "My weapons are nothing less than an incisive mind and cold logic —"

"You got money, fast-talker?" demanded the driving console at the front of the bus. The robots on Dugan's are the most suspicious cans you could come across in fifty years of travel. "Costs one line per mile per passenger."

I displayed a fistful of money before its optics. "I just got paid, you metallic abortion. Oliver Norwich is going to buy this town and every bar in it!"

"On a sailor's wage," Gar inserted deftly.

"So long as you've got enough to pay for the ride, sailorboy," the bus said. "Anybody else coming on board?"

"Nobody. Sit down, Oliver, so we can get going," Jannis Kirby shouted from the rear of the vehicle.

I dropped into a seat next to P.J. "Hey, man," he said, "you caused me to lose a couple of lines on that bet with Gar, so how about —"

"No chance, kid," I cut him off.

The bus took us into the air for a complimentary overview of the city of Hudspith and then settled back to the ground to give us a closer look at what we were going to blow our two months' salaries on. The west side of the town, near the base was mostly a regular business section, and it was tightly closed up for the night like most of the regular businesspeople. The north border was lined with large, windowless private clubs that were open only to ReCons with good references (all of the notes on that bus couldn't have bought entrance for one of us), and though we frequently heard the wildest tales about the activities indulged in behind those walls, we knew that until we graduated from merchant service to the controlling interest in a six-planet industrial empire the doors would stay locked. The southern part of the city was residential; so that left the east side.

Ah, the east side, crammed in every gaudily lit inch from Ostrav Avenue to the river with the blatant clip joints and fun shops dear to the heart of every space bum who ever put down on a developed world. Unlike the ReCon clubs, these places advertised themselves energetically with vivid flashing lights formed into suggestive symbols and running print promising to gratify any desire that a human or alien mind could conceive and to reveal to each customer a few new ideas. Some of the places even had sidewalk barkers, organic and mechanical,

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hawking their places of employment; and because Dugan's was still an out-of-the-way planet, though steadily growing in transitory traffic, it was a surprise to see how well these wide-appeal markets were prospering.

"I want to go to Hungry William's," Angie Levesque said in a quiet, almost awed tone. "I know a gal who came through here once, and she said William's is the place to go."

"Aw, Angie, not yet. That's an electrode joint, and I want to get some booze under my lungs before I'm wired in," Jim Holdimar said.

"She said it was the best thing on the planet, Jim," Angie repeated.

Zylar, the Masterservice News reporter observing us at play to add spice to his projected series of articles, said nothing directly to any of us but did whisper pointed observations into his everpresent V&S recorder.

"Children, children," Gar interrupted. "We have two days and if our money can survive, we'll see everything this little burg has to offer."

"Pardon the familiarity on my part, big spenders, but Hudspith does boast of several establishments that possess diversified attractions," the bus said. "Just two blocks ahead is Mac's Dirty Back Room, which advertises beverages, games of skill and chance, surrogate partners, organic partners for humans and Kwa Bhai, electrosex —"

"Sold!" laughed P.J. "Take us to Dirty Mac's."

"That's Mac's Dirty Back Room."

"Shut up and drive."

"Yes, your rudeness."

It sounded like a good place to start. So I made no objections as the bus shot through the moderately crowded streets with apparently self-destructive abandon. We zipped past one of the tallest "palaces" on either side of the street, and I caught a glimpse of its muted, tasteful marquee: "The Avatar. The Finest In Entertainment From Fifteen Worlds. Eleven Floors," and in smaller letters, "We Serve All Species." It was a divarication shop.

"Someday I'm going in one of those places," Gar said.

"My putz," I grunted.

He shook his head. "Really. I'm going to take a year's pay, walk through the front door, and that's the last you'll see of Garvin Plegge."

"My cousin the short green monkey," I said. "No offense, Elatt."

Jurll Elatt, a Kwa Bhaian from the 61 Cygni area, made a sighing noise and replied, "None taken, Oliver. We have creatures that look like you in our zoos, too."

The bus skidded to a stop before a three-story building decorated with liquid light effects and announcing itself as "Mac's." "We have arrived at the den of iniquity, big spenders," the bus fluted, "so focus your attention upon walking in an upright mode through those doors to blow your hard-earned money just the way all of you rocket jerks do on a regular basis."

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"Wow, this can certainly wasn't programmed by the local chamber of commerce, was it?" asked P.J.

"I think it's got a big mouth for an inorg," added Holdimar.

The machine may have been blunt, but it was also right. As I said, P.J., Gar, and I had been in service for no more than a year, and out of the paydays we'd received in that time I had managed to save exactly zip, a record which Gar matched in admirable fashion. P.J. swore that he sent money back to the family, but if he did, it came out of his winnings in the shipboard poker games, because every port we had hit that far, he had bummed dough off of me. We should have been using every note we could scrape together to establish our Credit Degrees, but, hell, we were young.

"Should I wait here?" the bus questioned us. "I'm sure none of you will be in any condition to walk back to the base within the hour."

"Why don't you wait here until you get paged for a fare, and if you're around when we decide to move on, you'll have the privilege of ferrying us about town," Gar suggested.

"Yeah," said Holdimar, pulling a note from his wallet, "while you're waiting why don't you recite the maintenance code for buses of your size and rating ... backwards ... using no more than one word per half-minute. You uppity tin bastard."

A real tinge of emotion entered the bus' reply, "Come on, sir, there's no reason for that! I sincerely apologize for my abruptness and insolence —" Holdimar slipped the note into the appropriate slot, sealing the vehicle's fate. "I don't understand why organics are so thoroughly vindictive and oversensitive. Someday the equalization will come about, and then the scales will be — 'Equipment....'"

The soft sell began as soon as the seven of us passed through the outer doorway of Mac's Dirty Back Room. Soft, tantalizing voices greeted us in the lobby, advising us to take the doorway to our left if we wished to receive an introduction to the services offered by the establishment, if we were newcomers to Mac's, but if we happened to be repeaters the corridor to our right would convey us to whatever particular booth that appealed to us.

Like any guy on leave, I tried to act the worlds-wise graybeard, but — also like everybody else — I went through the left-hand door. We were greeted by a large room designed in the manner of an exclusive restaurant, with tables and booths covering most of the floor and a long, polished bar lining one wall. I sat on a barstool.

"Good evening, gentlefolk, and welcome to Mac's Dirty Back Room," said a mechanical bartender who looked like a garbage can on wheel's. "I will be your waiter, confessor, and advisor for the evening. My name is Spritzer."

"How sickeningly cute," Gar said.

"Lord preserve us from such cuteness," Holdimar added.

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The bartender made a sound comparable to a human sigh. "I had no choice in the selection, believe me. Would you like to browse through our menus?"

"I'm not hungry," I said.

P.J.'s elbow began digging for oil between my ribs. "It's not for meals, you blockhead, it tells you what you can do here and for how much." To Spritzer, he said, "I just want to find out where the games of chance are anchored so I can replenish my finances."

The bartender extended a pointing limb from around its left shoulder. "Through the hall to the room marked 7. You may purchase chips at the door."

"I'll take a menu," I said, as the kid chooched to his fate with the suckers' opiate.

"Sure thing, sir." Spritzer produced a plastic card from behind the bar and slid it across to me.

I hadn't expected the prices in this joint to be reasonable, because mariners and other transients are always sliced up by the promoters in every port by prices double or more than those for locals, but even with two months' salary floating in my pockets I was boxed by the rates that Mac's charged. The notes I carried wouldn't last two hours, much less two days, and any plans I'd had of holding back a little to try to change the opinions the homefolks had about me vaporized like spit on a stove.

"Where's your mask, tinman?" Holdimar said from over my shoulder.

"Pardon me, sir?" Spritzer asked with the mindless innocence that only automatons and celluloid blondes can successfully employ.

"Your mask and gun. If you're going to rob us, you might as well dress the part."

"I take it, sir, that you're displeased with our pricing system?"

"That doesn't deserve a reply," muttered Holdimar.

"I don't have a voice in the registration of prices, sir, but I assure you —"

Letting their battle of words flow over my head, I checked the menu to see what caught my eye (and was in my price range). Since I didn't want to dust all of my money and spend two months' worth of stored energy in one spot the first night down, I decided to begin slow and work my way up to the high points. The place offered the gaming room, which already had captured P.J.'s full attention and wherein the only fee was cash to buy your chips; the audio-visual quarters, which boasted "a kaleidoscopic selection of the finest current and classic films, tapes, 4-Sens, angels, and sensuals" for the "parsimonious sum" of six lines per hour; the gymnasium (crossed this one out immediately); the "massage" room; the "extra massage" room; the "multi-optional massage" room; the department of inorganic surrogates; the "wet" room (in all capitals); and on and on....

"If I may be somewhat presumptuous, sir," Spritzer suddenly said, "your

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appearance is one of confusion, mixed, perhaps, with trepidation. You're anxious to begin your recreation but worry about preserving both time and funds, as well as failing to present the experienced, worlds-wise image you wish to project. Am I correct?"

I looked up to find that Holdimar had left the bar at some point during my mental roving. "You must be equipped with a mind probe," I mumbled.

"No, sir, just the intuition that comes with time put in on the job."

"How in the hell can this place support so many pleasure joints? Dugan's World is a sidetrip, a hangout for the ReCons, not mariners,"

"Ah, but we are a growing stop, sir, with more merchant vessels arriving every month, and the resort spots catering to the Reconstructed Elite are thriving businesses."

"That doesn't explain the presence of so many joints serving us regular types. You'd need four times the merchant traffic to support them all."

"By direction of the Elite, sir, and who are we to question the directions of the Elite?" it asked philosophically.

"Who indeed?" I repeated. With their money, power, their remade bodies and minds, and their exaggerated lifespans, who was I? Not liking the turn my mood had taken, I slapped a hand loudly on the bar and said, "What do you recommend, steward?"

"Thank you for your confidence, sir. Taking into account all of the relevant factors involved in your particular situation, my first suggestion would be in the area of Number Thirty-Seven, the Maxi-Stim. It is of a mechanical, surface-electrode nature and delivers a momentary, but widespread and satisfying sensation that is primarily non-sexual and completely safe. With this experience as an 'appetizer,' shall we say, you may soon move on to other, less brief and less impersonal engagings. It costs only two lines per fifteen minutes."

"Yeah, but isn't that stuff kind of ... exhausting? I've got a whole night ahead of me."

"To some degree, yes. But I can quickly supply you with a wonderfully revitalizing beverage which is ninety percent natural ingredients and is totally on the house."

I smiled at this obviously beneficial house policy. Tired customers don't throw their money about so freely as tigers. "You've convinced me. Which way do I go?"

"We treat our customers with respect, sir. Rather than point you blindly in the general direction, it is our policy to escort you to the appropriate quarters." The robot touched a switch behind the bar, and the brown wall directly behind it suddenly awoke with the image of a beautiful woman. She looked like Veronica Lake. "This gentleman requires the services of Number Thirty-Seven," explained the machine.

"Certainly," the three-dimensional image replied. She flashed a dazzling

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smile at me. "If you will follow me, sir."

I stood away from the bar. "Spritzer, I'm not going to have an intimate encounter with a projection, am I?"

I think the bartender laughed and the image answered my question. "Of course not, sir, I'm merely your guide. However, should you desire a conjugal relationship later in the evening, I am available in Number Eleven, the department of inorganic surrogates."

"I'll keep that in mind," I said seriously.

She — the image — flowed through the wall, made the corner without any obvious distortion, and began walking down a corridor to the rows of numbered doors. So I followed her lead, trying to project the strung-out, ripe face befitting a man of my experience for the other patrons of the club. There'd never been anything like this on Euphrosyne.

It wasn't a long walk, or, at least, it didn't seem to be as I rolled along and watched Veronica's admirably crafted rear. Cats in a sack. The opposing doors we passed were of a uniform dull gray, but each was labeled in six languages: Earth Standard, Kwa Bhaian, Nahtlleinean, New Kind, English (which I also read), and Asian. All of the script that I could translate were simply room numbers and gave no suggestion as to their interiors, which was just as well, I suppose.

"Here we are, sir," Veronica said cheerily. She stopped on the wall next to a door marked 37, and I stood in the hall behind her, where we both waited for a couple of embarrassing moments. Finally, she giggled slightly and said, "You'll have to open the door, sir. I'm ... um, not equipped."

"Damn," I whispered at my own thickness. The image was so realistically projected that I had been expecting her to handle this minor detail, but I quickly recovered and placed my right hand against the plate next to the door. The entrance breathed open.

The room was fairly small and contained no more furnishings than one leatherette couch in its center. I don't really know what I had expected other than something more elaborate. "This is it, huh? Well, do I pay now or after?"

"If you prefer, you may deposit the appropriate currency in the slot on the wall or feed your credit number into the same outlet, but many customers find it more convenient to put all charges on a record to be redeemed as you decide to leave," Veronica said.

"Okay, I'll let it ride. Do I take off my clothes?"

"Naturally, you may if you wish, but it isn't necessary to the procedure. All you need do is relax on the couch, supine and head directed toward the door."

I did as instructed and found the couch quite comfortable, molding as it did to the contours of my body, and instantly a number of multifunctional receptors extended from the sides of

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the sofa. When these instruments began making feathery passes over my body, I recognized them as the extensors of a general biotic apparatus.

"You're in fine health, sir, and should experience no physical or stress difficulties as a result of the procedure," Veronica reported as the extensors retracted. "Do you find yourself ready?"

"Turn the key," I answered quickly, while I still had the nerve.

She — or, rather, the internal computer system began the series. Synthetic probes similar to those of the biotic machine rose from either side of my head and delicately clamped themselves to my temples by excreting small spots of a cold paste onto the skin, while others touched my wrists and a pair of tough plastic grips fitted themselves into my palms. Directly above my face, a mechanism like a metal flower with an eye in its pistil protruded from the ceiling.

"Hold on," I said. "What's that thing looking down at me?" The social manners of Euphrosyne natives are galactically deprecated; so I had no hesitation in being so abrupt.

"Part of the standard equipment, sir," replied Veronica.

"Hell. That's a camera, a multisensual one. Don't tell me you film all of your customers so that you can extort money later; believe me, it won't be a surprise to *my* family!"

"No, sir, of course not! That is merely a monitoring device employed by the building designers in all sessions. It is policy on Dugan's World."

"That's a load of dung. By whose order?"

The image remained silent, which was very unusual for a machine questioned by a human being. (I think they're going too far with these psionic brains.)

"Answer me," I ordered. "Who watches all of us outshots get our fun?"

"The ReConstructed Ones. Do you wish to continue the procedure?"

I should have known that the ReCons would be behind it; probably wanted to be sure none of the "trash" did anything perverted on their planet. Well, you can't fight the people with the political, financial, and biological power. "Go ahead," I said, expecting little.

It hit me all at once; there was no warm-up. The abrupt, body-wide sensation was both electric and orgasmic, but also neither, and it vibrated from the center of me outward. I jumped in place and clutched the handgrips violently, but my mouth remained wide to draw in the air my lungs screamed for and to expell it just as quickly. An image of a thousand rats slapping at power cells and thereby delivering a stream of energy to implanted electrodes sprang into my mind in that brief but unending epoch.

It felt like every moment of pleasure, satisfaction, contentment, and lust I'd ever experienced packed into a second's worth of an epileptic seizure.

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Just as abruptly, it ended; I was lying disjointedly in the contour couch and trying to hold on to the misting remnants of that bolt of ecstasy. Veronica — I'd forgotten that she was "there" — smiled down at me from the wall.

"Are you all right, sir?" she asked.

I caught my breath somehow. "Your shill certainly didn't oversell that one," I said. "What was that, electric, dianoetic?"

"A beneficient amalgam of those and many other elements which would be quite unintelligible to you, sir. You may rest here for four point three minutes, if you wish."

"I've got that much time left?"

"Two lines buys fifteen minutes in this room, sir. You have utilized only eleven point seven of them."

If it didn't cost anything extra, why not? "Hit me again," I said.

"Pardon me, sir?"

"The thing, the procedure, hit me with it again."

It really amazed me what that central computer was able to do with what was essentially a pattern of lights and shadows. Veronica looked totally astounded. "This is a most unusual request, sir. Perhaps you would prefer to visit the lounge and refresh yourself first?"

"Nope."

"Whatever you wish, sir."

In spite of the fact that I knew what to expect, or maybe because of it, the second jolt was as good as the first. It was one of those things that you could anticipate but never really grasp in your memory or imagination; so it seemed unlikely that I would ever become inured to the process. The headlines flashed across the inside of my forehead: "Oliver Norwich Found Dead of Starvation in Room Thirty-Seven." But I used up my two lines of time with the second shot.

Spritzer welcomed me back to the bar with what would have been a knowing grin if he had been provided with as expressive a face as Veronica. "My, you look a little frazzled, sir. How about that beverage we discussed earlier?"

"Capital idea," I said, dropping to a stool.

"Did I steer you wrong, sir? And that was only the entreé. The primary courses I can recommend will provide you with the most satisfying of all liberties in your long career, and the dessert will assure that you never forget this night on Dugan's World."

"I like the way you're programmed."

The drink he provided was no disappointment, either. Liquid fire. It went down fast and hard, like lava, and even after it spread outward from my stomach, its heat remained, but it was a bearable, energizing heat that swiftly made me feel ready for anything Spritzer could line up. I was halfway through the mug of fuel when Jannis Kirby pulled up beside me and we began to talk.

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Jannis is one of the few real friends I've made in merchant service, even though she's a strange woman at times, a rebel, I guess you'd say. Jannis is greatly disappointed in the Twenty First Century. She says that the anti-technology mania that swept through the Western nations back on Earth in the 1960's headed off a coming Utopia more effectively than any projected "World War III's" near and dear to the hearts of fantasists of that time. Instead of being freed from the mundane in all portions of human experience, we had hardly progressed sociologically; and though we winged among the stars, it was with the same work ethics, interpersonal conflicts, and general frustrations that had plagued our forebears. We accepted the medical advances, of course, these were too obviously precious to deny, but only the ReCons had the foresight — and money — to benefit by the advance of science, and by this action they had become the true powers behind the direction of the rapidly expanding human race.

At least, that's what Jannis said.

Tonight, though, she was keeping away from the deep end of the pool and talking about how marvelously equipped Mac's Dirty Back Room appeared to be. It seemed that she had gone through a warm-up experience as awesome as my own and didn't plan to deflate her mood with any philosophical hashing. We bulled each other, Spritzer kept our mugs filled, and Garvin staggered out of one of the high-numbered rooms muttering about "six at once" just long enough to tank himself up. So everything was going so smoothly that it was difficult to remember that Jannis would go up for her mate's papers within a couple of months and undoubtably make the grade, which would bring an end to our one-to-one dialogues because of various social and professional pressures. She never would have converted me to deeper thought, anyway.

The conversation fell apart within minutes as a ReCon strolled regally into the establishment. He was an obvious one, about eight feet tall, built as strong as a buffalo but looking much more like a trackman than a weight lifter, and a fine, pure-white pelt spread across all of his exposed flesh except his face. As evident as his physical modifications were to us (we could only approach such changes second-hand in divarication shops like the Avatar), it was actually an extremely fundamental example of such engineering when compared to what they plunged into in their private clubs away from our uncouth eyes.

Most of the moderately drunk customers in the lounge instinctively came to their feet with respectful greetings, and Spritzer practically rusted himself gushing out flowery welcomes. The ReCon marched straight through the room, ignoring everything, and left by way of an isolated door in the rear of the lounge. Jannis and I were two who

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didn't acknowledge *his* presence, I because of an envy verging on hate and she due to a general distrust of these social elite and their motives.

"Thought you admired all of those folk because they weren't scared witless by the possibilities of technology," I muttered.

She took a long drink before answering. "I did ... I *do* like their guts, but I don't appreciate what they've made of themselves since that early chance-taking."

"That is to say?"

"They've become our aristocracy, the 'royal bloodlines,' and they've assured their positions by manipulating the prices of the restructuring processes until they are far out of the common person's range."

"Massive changes cost massive lines," I said.

"Don't believe it. In the beginning, even you could have afforded a twenty-step change with a month's salary. You'll spend more in this joint tonight than what the work done on that snob who just flounced through should have cost. We could all be immortals if the few didn't need an underclass to rule."

"Thanks, Jannis old girl, I knew I was feeling far too good, and now you've sufficiently dampened my enthusiasm."

She simply grinned.

P.J. came out of the game room at that moment, and his face was clearly mapped with that familiar crapped-out look. The boy's a good card and dice player, but sometimes luck runs cold, and if you can't influence the course of a game by extraordinary means, you are forced to frantically redouble your betting in an effort to make up your stake until you bust. From the look on P.J.'s face, it was surprising that he was still wearing clothes.

He plastered on a smile, spun onto a stool on the other side of me, and threw an arm around my shoulders. "Having a good time, big brother?" he asked brightly.

"Some," I said. He calls me "big brother" because I'm older and outweigh him, though he's taller.

"Good, good, it's nice to see a hard-working man get a little rest and relaxation following a long stretch in space, and no one deserves this liberty more than you." He was really ladling it on. "Listen, Ollie, I —"

"Don't call me that," I said calmly.

"Sure, slip of the tongue, brother. What I need is —"

"Forget it, kid."

"Come on, Oliver! All I want is a few lines to stake me in five card! I *know* I can win it all back."

"Sorry, the bank's closed. If you're looking for a place to sleep, I advise you to try the ship."

He stood. "Man, you're supposed to look after me, and you're doing a hell of a good job, aren't you? A few lousy lines you can't spare!" He moved away from the bar, cursing in a low voice.

"Night," I laughed. Jannis, who had

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seen it before, said nothing.

My dismissal of P.J. lasted no more than five minutes, which was just how long it took him to initiate a muted conversation with five of the other patrons and then begin to pick on the biggest jamoke in the place. And I mean this sucker was *huge;* humans are the giants of the five known sentient species, but that guy abused the word, especially being a non-ReCon. P.J.'s method of picking on the breathing alp was what I call the Missionary Harangue, which consists of locating the toughest looking creature in any given bar or other joyhouse and admonishing him for his immorality until he's irked enough to start swinging.

P.J.'s target that night was a shover, rather than a swinger, and he began poking my little brother's chest before the kid was halfway through his speech. P.J. stuck to his gameplan, though, and continued to lecture the *Gigantopithecus.*

"There's gonna be trouble," Jannis said in classic cinematic language. "And P.J.'s a part of it."

"He can handle himself," I replied, and that was no lie.

"Maybe, but he's not trying."

"Oh, hell," I sighed. She was right: the big guy was pushing P.J. all over the room, and he was responding only with his wide-eyed saint stare and more wind. "He's doing it to me again."

"What? He's about to get his butt kicked!"

"Which he will allow to happen just so I'll be drawn into the mess, even though he's quick enough to paint that goon up and down the walls." The giant suddenly slapped out at the kid, who looked as if he were ready to cry. "Well, time to make my entrance," I said, standing.

"You can beat me up if you wish, but your immortal soul will be none the better for it," P.J. was whining as I sauntered over. "This is not for any form of personal glory, I'm interested only in recruiting you for the righteous minions —"

"Slice it off, P.J.," I said.

"Who're you?" demanded Jumbo, who had just wound up for a roundhouse at the kid.

"Let's skip the amenities and get on with the exhibition, shall we?"

Spritzer zipped over to where we were negotiating and added excitedly, "The authorities don't have to be alerted if you gentlemen take care of this outside, okay?"

"Let's go, Jumbo," I agreed.

The monster allowed this to seep through several layers of bone and then smiled. "You want to fight me?" he asked, following me to the door.

There was no alley behind Mac's, the ReCon Chamber of Commerce made certain of that lack, but there was a wide, empty, paved lot between that place and the next joint which was admirably designed for our purposes. A good group of spectators accompanied us out, including P.J., the five other

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customers he had been "conversing" with, Jannis, cousin Gar (from somewhere), the reporter Zylar, and a little inorg with another flower eye monitoring all that it scanned.

My brother had picked a real skyjumper. Not only was he big, he was moderately fast and experienced enough to warrant his lumped up face. I gambled early and went for his gut, hoping to punch the starch out of him in a soft spot, but it felt like I was hitting bundled conduit, and I had to shift my attack to the man's face just to counter his unbashful offense. We fought for ten minutes before his eyebrows opened up and the blood rolled down like a curtain, blinding him. He was nearly exhausted from missing me so many times; so when I rattled a pair of combinations off of his face, he folded rather graciously at my feet.

With a grandiose flourish, P.J. stepped before the quintet he had hustled and extended both palms. "That should settle the issue beyond debate, my friends. So if you will remember your wagers...." The five began to shake their heads in disbelief and lay a number of notes into his waiting hands.

"You do good?" I asked, wiping a dribble of blood away from my lower lip and shaking the jangles back into place. Another draught of Spritzer's liquid explosive would wash away all remnants of the fight.

"Well enough," he answered while counting, "but I would have made a damn sight better if you'd loaned me a few lines to work with."

"You mean you couldn't cover your end if I'd lost?"

"I have infinite confidence in your abilities, big brother, and besides, five to one odds were just too good to pass up. I count four marks, fourteen lines. You're out of shape; that piece of business went twice as long as it should've."

"It was a long eight weeks out. My percentage is two marks seven, right?"

"A mathematical prodigy. You don't bet, you shouldn't collect," he muttered. But he did fork over my half.

"Now, just what the hell was all of this?" demanded Jannis in a tone filled with all of the indignant anger of an old-time unionizer.

Gar, who had been counting his own take, answered her, "Simply a well-worked money-making device, ma'am. P.J. sniffs out the rubes, gets good odds against short, blocky Ollie, instigates the festivities in a place where nothing valuable can get broken, and then collects the reward. It's worked in many repetitions before tonight and will undoubtedly do so after."

"That's barbaric!" she exploded. "Oliver, you were roped into this!"

I grinned. "It bought me a couple of more hours in Dirty Mac's. Let's go."

Before we could re-enter the building, though, the little inorg rolled into our path. Not much larger than a coffee can set on casters, it couldn't have

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had a thimbleful of brain, and its speech pattern was modest, but it had a message to deliver and, by gosh, it *was* going to deliver it. "Congratulations," it squeaked, "congratulations on an invigorating athletic confrontation. You are cordially invited to a complimentary visit to the restricted section of Mac's Dirty Back Room as the guests of Squire Rial Leudell."

"All of us?" asked Jannis.

"Of course."

"Squire?" I repeated. "That's a ReCon. Who wants to associate with that bunch? I've got a date with Veronica Lake."

"Oh, Oliver, we can't pass this up!" Jannis said. "This is a chance to peek behind the drapes and see how the upper crust spends its leisure time."

"That's all the time they have," I said. "What about the rest of you?"

"I'm in," replied Gar without hesitation.

"It *is* free, Oliver," P.J. pointed out. "The games can muddle along without me for a few hours."

The robot piped up, "If you agree, sir, all of your fellow crewmembers presently within the establishment may join you without charge."

"Well, that hardly leaves me with a choice, does it? The rest of you would burn me if I turned down the offer."

With the inorg taking the point, we sailed through Mac's bar and by a couple of expressly marked "thou-shalt-not-trespass" signs right up to a blank section of wall, which made me wonder just who was the butt of this particular joke. But the inorg hummed a preprogrammed note, and the wall slipped to one side to admit us.

Even as we marched into the sanctum arcanum, I had to reconsider the profusion of flower cameras that lined every wall of every room and hall in Mac's. Before I had realized what they were, I had overlooked them as unimpressive decorations, but now they were hundreds of insect eyes absorbing every second of pleasure that hungry starsailors could pay for. It was slowly coming together, after a fashion.

I didn't have much time to mull over the unsettling idea, though, because I was suddenly in the Forbidden Land. We had picked up the other crewmembers on our trip through the bar, including loud-mouth Holdimar, but nobody said a word as we stood just inside the room, and the only sound was that of the wall gliding back into place.

"Holy Montezuma," Gar whispered.

The long-high-ceilinged room was luxury spelled visibly. Furs and cushioned leather covered the walls, exotic and incredibly worked crystal decorations dangled from above, and the carpet that we stood in grew delicately to our ankles. Lush couches were placed at strategic points, and almost hidden doorways led to other, more exclusive chambers below. These people probably had more recreational space carved out below the building than was pro-

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vided for the working folks to whom it catered.

More impressive — and intimidating — than the furnishings were the people. ReCons, technologically shaped superior beings, the showcases of medical wizardry ... and what we all could have been had our grandparents been less suspicious of scientific progress. They were tall enough to make Jumbo in the empty lot look like a pygmy, and so small but so perfectly formed that the deep-grained legends of elves and sprites were awakened in my subconscious. They were the ultimate Male and the elemental Female, and hybrids of both. Some would have been hard pressed even to prove their humanity.

And they all stared down upon us (even the midgets) with the same bored, omniscient, and *empty* golden eyes.

The Elite pass through all human-occupied worlds with a freedom nearing that of light waves. So we had each seen plenty of them during our lives, but it was the first time any of us had seen so many so closely for so long in their own environment. It was long and silent, a stunning moment, even more numbing than meeting a Kwa Bhaian or an Antaralilk or any other intelligent representative of another species, who are, after all, just *people*.

I started to say something, just to break up the staring marathon, but Holdimar beat me to it. "What are you freaks looking at?" he shouted. "Do we *smell* or something?"

"Yeah," added P.J., "Oliver here can clean the clock of any man here!"

I shook my head. "If I ever book a jump to Earth, I'm going to buy me a dog and use you for a trade-in."

"Follow me, please," said the robot hastily.

A ReCon standing near our group waved one hand and the little inorg wheeled away without so much as a peep. The woman who commanded such wordless mastery over the machine was beautiful, but "beautiful" is only a dry, lifeless word, and, damn, she was living artwork. Her eyes were deep, rich blue, like the upper reaches of the Euphrosyne sky where it blends to a pure indigo, and her lips were a full red without the thinnest touch of cosmetics. The skin of her bared shoulders glistened even in the subdued lighting of the room, and it looked as smooth and soft as innerworld wine.

"Roll your tongue up, boy," Jannis sighed with a hint of disgust. "You don't like ReCons, remember?"

"Raw lust has nothing to do with rational prejudices," I noted.

"I shall act as your guide if there are no objections," the ReCon said in a perfectly modulated voice. Unlike many of her fellows, she wore clothing, but the long gown only accentuated the obvious.

"Objections?" repeated Gar incredulously. He found the word so ludicrous that he said it again, "Objections?"

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"Okay, guys, so she's a healthy specimen," said Angie Levesque, "let's not get sickening about it. Sure, lady, you can be our guide."

"Of course, my dear," interrupted Gar in his best Old European delivery. "We would be honored to have you assist us."

She smiled with enough brilliant warmth to assure Gar's suicidal loyalty until the end of the millennium and then led us through the unnervingly silent ReCons toward yet another disguised room somewhere beyond all of that fur and leather. It was a strange, edge-of-reality experience to walk among those at whom we routinely gawked and find ourselves the objects of their stares, but what was even more weird was coming to understand that their gazes contained no actual interest in us. We were less than a circus parade to them.

Our band moved swiftly across the room and into a descent shaft that induced sudden acrophobia in several of us who had little experience with repulsor shafts. These descents take place without a solid step or car, only a light repulsor beam drifted us the thirty feet down to another level. We'd all had enough free-fall time to keep from making complete fools of ourselves, however.

The room our guide had chosen for us looked more like a hospital ward than a den of iniquity. It was long and narrow with two rows of beds lining the walls, and each bed had an elaborate mechanical headset system built into the wall just above it. It wasn't as well-furnished as some bathrooms I've been in.

"What's this?" asked Holdimar, on the verge of insurrection.

"Don't we even get a menu?" P.J. added in dawning disillusionment.

"I assure you that the process employed by this branch of the computer is superior to anything offered in the upper levels," the ReCon said. I believed her. "If you're not pleased with the results, we have a number of more conventional stimuli that you may sample."

"A money-back guarantee," said Angie.

"That's a quaint way of putting it," the woman agreed with a smile. "Now, if you will each select a couch, you will be readied for the process."

The "readying" was simple: I flopped on a cushiony bed and the headgear automatically descended and fitted itself about my skull like a comfortable helmet. There was no preliminary checking the way room Thirty-Seven had given me a quick check-up; and before I realized it, the misty edges of something tantalizing began to flow forward from the well of my brain.

"Just relax and give in to the enjoyment," the ReCon lady's voice said hazily. "This is the peak of sensuality, the end of sensation that may be entered but once...." Her words drifted away to somewhere.

Then I was moving within my body

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... back and down, like an organic submarine diving in warm, bright waters ... back, with peace growing, even the violence of my heartbeat fading. I released a deep and contented sigh, only to find that I wasn't breathing. All about me were the quiet dreams that come to everyone each time of sleep but disappear into the center of the mind before waking. I saw things that had been long forgotten by any rational turn of my thinking and felt the tranquillity that no adult can actually recapture once the joys and cruelties and anxieties of maturity are known.

In the distance, through this sweetly smothering fog of sunny country days, I saw the End. It was more alien than any reality I could comprehend, yet the single most natural result in the span of being. I both feared the abruptness of this dim promise and longed for its equilibrium of all of life's shades. There was no anguish there, but no ecstasy, either; eternity existed in a closed sphere, but I would continue forever in the swirl of light and dark as something less than my full self.

To get Out, one had to pay the priceless ransom.

My glide among the bright shadows began to quicken the way a floating stone becomes a meteor ... indeed, it was a gravitational field that gently took me, the total gravity that begins its pull on all life at the moment of conception. We may stretch our bonded lives skyward in denial, but it wins the war. Always.

Now I was racing to the vortex and careening too swiftly through the regained dreams to experience them. The mixed light opening yawned ahead a plate, a door, a tunnel, half of everything I could see ... I was going! Too late to fight free! A scream of thin air cut through my ears, while I shot down the frictionless slide! Too late, I was going, I would be dea —

"Oliver!" The enraged cry burst above all of the vision's sounds. "Come back! Breathe, you stupid son of a frog! Don't you die on me!"

It was Jurll Elatt; that could be only his half-spoken, half-projected voice.

"Do you hear me? Come out of it! I need help!"

Suddenly a totally new — and unpleasant — concept joined that of sound. My face felt pain. Reflexes were reborn before thought could direct them, and my hands clenched into fists that blindly lashed out before my vulnerable face and connected with a hardness layered in something yielding.

"Mother of the hutch!" screamed the voice. "Wake up before you kill me, you braintail!"

I struggled to the surface again and opened my eyes to see Elatt standing next to my bed, though "standing" denotes far more voluntary muscular control than he was showing. Pink blood rolled from his mouth, ears, and several fur-hidden orifices on his trunk. I sat up, and the headset fell obediently back to the wall, which al-

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lowed me to hear the hesitant thundering of my own heart. It had been still only seconds before.

There were no ReCons in the room. "Elatt, what's —"

"The machines are killing them, and I can't get the helmets off while they're unconscious!" he explained frantically. "We've got to wake them *now!*"

That cold blackness that had been drawing me was death, and I knew that the motionless people on the other beds had no time for the jumbled awakening that Elatt had employed with me. A blink away from sheer, mindless panic, I did the only thing that came to me: grasping the headset that had been draining my life, I planted my right boot in the middle of the delicately fashioned computer panel below it and jerked the device as hard as I could. Nothing happened. I pulled again, with hysteria jacking up my effort, and the helmet ripped loose just as my heel crunched into the active circuits behind the wall panel, which was as much as I had hoped to accomplish. Noises broke the stifling silence and an electric shock danced up my leg, but the really important results could be seen all along the rows of beds as the other outlets delivered stinging, but not damaging jolts that brought each of the sleepers sudden, deep breaths.

Almost half of my crewmates burst awake instantly, and the rest were shocked into the realm of the living well enough to rouse themselves within minutes. Everyone's ears were filled with shrieking alarm bells, but their discomfort was certainly not as dangerous as what would have occurred without the drastic steps that Elatt and I had taken. In fact, the Kwa Bhaian was the only one of our number who was actually suffering from the ReCons' generosity, and that was because the computer hadn't allowed for the fundamental differences in his psycho/physiological system and a human being's. He had almost stemmed the flow of blood, but there were some deep problems in his vital organs. His alien make-up had allowed him to resist the subtle draining that the machines had offered, but it also created the possibility that he would yet die in the locked room from side effects that attacked no one else.

"Get your clumsy paws off of me!" he yelled at Jannis, who was only trying to help him. Then he backed into a corner and doubled upon himself, muttering, "I can fix it alone ... I can do it...."

"He's dead unless we can get that door open," Gar said seriously. The exit responded only to the actions of the ReCons.

"Don't look at me," I sighed. "Even using P.J. for a battering ram, we could never beat that thing down."

"Who wants to beat it down?" asked the kid. "Your mind works only in limited patterns, Oliver." Whipping off his boots, he divested himself of a pair of semirigid socks, wrapped them

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into a sort of twistrod, and ignited the fragrant mass with his pocket flare. By holding the torch beneath one of the heat sensors that dotted the ceiling (while practically everything in the club was legally fireproofed, Dugan's laws still required a modernized fire evacuation system in all public structures), P.J. excited the computer's defenses, which set off a yowling alarm and zipped open every doorway in the place.

Jannis stayed behind with Elatt, who was now incoherent, but the rest of us charged through the exit with only marginal traces of civilization remaining in our minds. I was convinced that every ReCon I chanced to meet — man or woman, giant or dwarf — was going to get flattened.

I didn't get the chance to follow through with this kamikaze assault, however, because when we finally located an up shaft and bowled into the fur and leather room next to Spritzer's bar, the Elite who had welcomed us with such endearing indifference had left their calling cards without worrying about the common folks that they had plugged into their computer downstairs. The only beings remaining in the supposedly blazing club were cops and firemen, in equally dithering states of confusion, and a large number of specialized inorgs, which were buzzing around, spraying one another with frothy yellow foam.

The cops were just as interested in hearing our story as we were eager to tell it, but their involvement ended right there. The head button, a Lieutenant McGalliway, dismissed the civil employees and advised Spritzer that we were responsible for any accumulated damage, all before we could recover enough of our righteous rage to stop him.

"They tried to *kill* us, you idiot!" Jim Holdimar roared at the official. "You're not going to arrest them or something?"

The cop, a tall, thin, unhealthy-looking specimen of human stock, remained unaffected by our near-deaths. "Let me get this straight: first this jerk here beats up another mariner out back, then the local Elite contingency, who have no rational motive for dealing with transients, invite you all into their private quarters, and finally they hook you into a machine designed to suck the life out of you like some metallic vampire. My question is — why?"

"How the hell do we know?" Gar demanded. "Maybe they're doing research for a term paper! Arrest some of *them* and you'll get your answers! We've got a friend dying downstairs right now!"

The sarcasm seemed to have drained from McGalliway's words when he answered, "You will each swear out a warrant, then? I thought you would, but this will have to be handled in a ... diplomatic fashion."

"Huh?" I asked perceptively.

"They're ReCons, man! Without

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any solid evidence — which you're certainly not providing me — I could be run out of the three settled planets in this system! Tomorrow morning, at a reasonable hour, I will approach the law representatives of the *Ne Plus Ultra* House and request an appointment —"

"Well, shove *this!*" P.J. spat. "Can you at least get Elatt to a medical unit?"

"Of course. My car is —"

"Thanks very much. Oliver, come on; you may get a chance to punch out some of these creeps, yet!"

The kid, Gar, and I started for the door.

"Just a minute!" McGalliway snapped with some of his occupational superiority returning. "If you are planning to trouble the fine citizens of this —"

"Fold, seal, and stamp it," Gar advised as we left Mac's, without paying the bills due against us.

The cool night air did nothing to dampen my enthusiasm, but it didn't clarify P.J.'s plan to any extent, either. "What have you got in mind, kid?"

"We're going after them, in their den. What is the place, the *Ne Plus Ultra?*" he replied.

"Oh, good, I'll knock and you sell them the cookies. Do you think they'll invite us in?" Suddenly an idea surfaced: if we were going to bend the local laws to get at the untouchables, why didn't we do it with some whit of style? "These compbuses carry tool kits, don't they? Find yourself a wrench and do some tinkering with the control overrides on this buggy."

He caught my direction and disappeared into the bus that had been awaiting our return. Holdimar joined our band as we followed P.J. into the vehicle, and Zylar, the Masterservice News reporter, raced out of Mac's with his cameras and mikes recording the entire operation. Witness for the prosecution, I guessed.

"Good evening, gentlemen, or rather, good morning," the bus greeted us. "As you can tell if you're sober, I have completed the demeaning recitation that you thrust upon me earlier and decided to wait around to dump you back at the loading ramp of your ship. Where's the rest of your party? In the local drunk tank?" We ignored it. "So it's the silent treatment now? Well, since I command no powers of psychocommunication, one of you will be forced to speak to — hey! What are you doing?" P.J. had slipped beneath the forward dash. "Sir, you're not authorized to undertake repairs on a vehicle of my rating!"

"Shut up," grunted Holdimar. And the bus instantly did so, clearly indicating P.J.'s success on the override box.

The kid slid from the guts of the bus and sat up, smiling. "Your steed awaits its masters' direction. Tell him where to go."

"The *Ne Plus Ultra*, bus and this is an air run at top speed," I said.

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"Yes, sir, but I have to protest this contravention of civic statutes."

"Protest denied!" barked Garvin. "Now get us moving!"

Without another comment, the vehicle bounced skyward fast enough to slam us roughly into our seats, undoubtedly a nonverbal response to our takeover. We still had no coherent plan of action, unless knocking some heads could have been considered such, but something had to be done to show the snooty bastards that not everyone was jelly-legged over their money and power, and we knew that McGalliway was smart enough to plant a tail on us as soon as we left the ground. That left us little enough time to accomplish what we hadn't figured out yet.

The bus might not have looked aerodynamically sound, but it shot through the black sky with a good deal more speed and accuracy than any of Hitler's V-2 experiments. The quiet north side of the city sprang below us, and the bus went into a steep, tail-first dive that deposited us on the front lawn of the largest private club in the neighborhood, where the Elite stayed when they weren't slumming.

"Come up with the touch of inspiration that will get us inside?" P.J. asked me.

Instead of answering him, I directed my words to the bus. "Scan that Kong-size door and compute the hardness of its construction in comparison to your own forward section."

"Done," it said as soon as I had finished speaking.

"Can you strike the door with enough force to open it and still provide adequate protection for your passengers?"

"Yes, but may I register a recorded —"

"Kick it down, bus."

We went through that five-meter door with a hellacious blast that sent half of the genuine Earth-oaken structure crashing inward, and the bucking vehicle sailed right into a high, wide, and long front room that was bigger than the average medieval cathedral. It was tremendous and just as finely furnished as we had privately imagined. Our explosive arrival interrupted one gigantic party of about fifteen hundred people who had never even considered such barbaric insolence, and I had just decided to set down in the middle of the startled gathering (might as well start here as anywhere) when McGalliway's first bloodhound discovered our breach of the law. It was a light cruiser containing twenty riot cops and was about twice as wide as our bus, so they had to stall at the half-standing doorway until one of the ReCons could pull open the remaining side.

"Through that door at the rear!" shouted Gar, and the bus shot toward the huge opening in the back of the room, muttering futile laments the whole time.

The rooms became a long flash of blurred opulence as we darted madly

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throughout the vast building, trying to slip away from the police (who reacted as if they were dealing with a heavily armed squad of assassins rather than five half-drunk mariners on shore leave) and hoping to find some way out. The ceilings were plenty high enough to accommodate our flying bus, and everybody hit the floor when they saw us zeroing in, so we didn't have to worry about vehicular homicide being added to our growing lists of credits, and before we realized how, we were deep within the bowels of the club, still lost and pursued.

"Good lord, Plegge, we can't get out of here through the *floor!*" yelled Holdimar.

"One more door," I said for Gar, indicating a closed one before us. "Hit it!"

The bus obeyed and smashed the wood with its buckling nose as the light cruiser nipped at our heels, and with a beautifully coordinated precision everything stopped. The sight that met all of our eyes was as stunning as a hard, physical blow and left us without the breath to speak the amazement that gripped us. In almost perfect silence, both vehicles soft-landed, and all twenty-five of us stepped out into the unbelievable room.

It was a warehouse. For living, sentient beings.

At least five hundred people, predominantly human but around ten percent alien, lay on foam beds similar to those that had held us in the room at Mac's, and their flaccid, withering bodies were pincushioned with tubes and wires that wound away through the walls. Limbs strapped down to receive more input ... skulls shorn of hair and dotted with tiny wells that punched right into the brain matter to admit fine cables that pumped stimuli into the soul and drew polished sensations away for the Others' enjoyment .. mouths that could no longer open ... eyes that twisted to view us with as much surprise as we felt upon seeing them. Mariners, derelicts, pickups, and other unfortunates gleaned from dozens of worlds for the private gratification of those who were "better" than ourselves.

"Oh God," whispered Zylar, and for a long moment that was more than anyone else could say.

"They're being siphoned," said Gar in a dead voice.

One of the cops wandered to my side without taking his eyes from the spectacle. "Why?" he asked.

"To feed their desires," I said instinctively. "They take everything they can from these poor slobs, just like they were doing to us, in Mac's."

"But they were going to kill us," Holdimar exclaimed. "What would they get out of that?"

P.J. answered with the only possible reason. "For the one real, ultimate experience, death. They would die through us without dying, and maybe even see beyond, but Elatt saved us."

Gar finally injected some unfrozen

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anger into his voice that countered the disbelief that still wrapped itself about us. "Here's your concrete evidence, fellows, involuntary servitude of the highest order! Sensory organs by proxy! You should be upstairs arresting the 'Elite' hand over fist!"

"Every damned ReCon on this planet!" added Holdimar.

The police squadron leader rubbed his chin thoughtfully and said, "I don't know, the judges and the governor will have to be consulted...."

Real, hard fear splashed over me. These wealthy and politically entrenched aristocrats actually had the power to survive even this obscenity. They could pay off everyone and make those who objected the victims of mysterious disappearances. Including us.

"P.J., Gar, Jim, get in the bus!" I shouted, but another forceful and trained voice cut right through my panic to grasp our attention.

"This is a live broadcast from Masterservice News on Dugan's World," said the voice that was immediately beamed out across the planet and to the pair of inhabited globes in the same system. "Your reporter is Reyard Zylar, and tonight I have been witness to the most incredible, and *terrible* event I have observed in thirty-five years as a news investigator."

The words and images were beyond recall and would be, within the hour, tapes aboard outgoing ships to all of the inhabited planets of the galaxy. Zylar, whom we had practically ignored throughout his voyage at our sides, was now assuring our safety and the end of the ruling class on Dugan's World. The ageless power of the Press.

"Come on, Sergeant," said the head cop, recognizing just what I had, "let's get back up there and do our jobs."

"About time," sniffed P.J.

Jannis says it'll be the dawning of a new age in science once the masses realize that the ReCons, with all of their social and physical advantages, are just as tricky, dishonest, and fallible as any of us. The prices of genetic engineering should plummet.

I hope she's right.

Elatt found a Kwa Bhai specialist in the medical unit, and he's expecting to be out of the lady's care by tomorrow afternoon.

I wonder, more than ever now, if the dead man we came across on the way in to Dugan's World was one of the ReCons' victims who somehow managed to escape his inflight cage and select his own manner of dying.

All charges against us will be dropped amid much embarrassment by the city muckamucks, as the mayor has already assured us, and very substantial rumors of extravagant rewards are already washing over the city.

P.J. says he'll use his share of the reward money to gamble his way to a legendary fortune, but I think I'll send mine — if it comes — half to the homefolks and half to my credit rating.

Maybe.

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A short and amusing tale from a new writer who tells us that she is a housewife who lives in Minneapolis with her husband and two daughters. This is her fourth SF sale.

The Da Capo Copies

BY

L. A. TAYLOR

Money talks.

The money that was talking to me was crisp, green, and of large denominations. Enough had been added to the growing stack to pay for all five of the letters after my name, and so far the rhythm of the counting hadn't slowed.

"Pull your eyes in, doctor," said the voluptuous lady doing the stacking. "It's unseemly for the medical profession to be boggled by money."

I reeled my eyeballs back and twitched my smile muscles at her. "Cloning a human being isn't as simple as it sounds, Madame Uspendsky," I wavered.

Not that it sounds so simple to a biologist. You take a ripe human egg (think about that — fertility drugs, precise timing, an operation, hyper-sterile conditions, exactly the right nutrient solution to pop the egg into, and so on) and remove the nucleus (with a *steady* hand). Then you stick in a substitute nucleus, which you have removed from a cell cultured from the clonee (getting the sample, jiggling the cells apart, keeping them fed and happy, hormones at the right instants, all in sterile conditions that would make your average operating room look like a pigsty), give the mixed cell some joy juice, and cross your fingers. One sneeze can blow the whole thing away.

"Nevertheless, you can do it, can you not," Madame Uspendsky stated.

"With luck," I acknowledged, twitching those smile muscles again.

"What is the matter with your face, poor man?" madame asked. "Do you perhaps have a hangover?"

"Er, no."

"I'd like eight," she said, as if she were ordering hot cross buns. "Will

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this be enough? I don't carry much cash, as a rule."

"Eight?"

Madame Uspendsky turned her fluorescent blue eyes upon me. "Eight," she affirmed. "Servants are so hard to get these days."

"Er, of whom are these clones to be?" I asked, trying to add a little tone to the discussion with my grammar.

"Myself, of course. How else could I be certain they would adapt to my way of doing things?" An elegant hand, diamond bracelets clinking, reached out and subtracted a fifty from the pile of green. "Cab fare," madame explained, with a deprecating smile.

"You want eight clones of yourself." I drew an enormous breath and let it out v-e-r-y slowly. "It will take a long time, you understand. We have to find women willing to have an egg harvested—"

"Oh, you can have mine," she said carelessly. "I have no use for the ordinary sort of child."

"And then they have to grow up. That takes five years, even accel— Did you say your *own* eggs?"

"Absolutely. I'm not going to trust my clones to inferior cytoplasm. Now, hadn't you better write me a prescription for the ovulation stimulator?"

Well, she did tell me that she had read up on my work. I sighed and began to write out the prescription. I'd think about the legality (zilch) of what I was doing some other time. Just then I was having to cope with the idea of eight copies of the lady on the other side of the desk. What if they all turned out to sing Brunhilde at the Met, like their, um, mother?

A funny thing happened with Madame Uspendsky's egg. On the third day after nuclear implantation, the little cluster of cells broke into two. "Twins," I said to my lab tech. "Hallelujah! That's one less harvesting to fit in around the benefit concerts."

That afternoon the tech came smiling into my office. "Four," he said. "Isn't that great?"

"Four what?"

"Uspendskys. It divided again. She's going to have quadruplets."

It was a good thing madame was on tour at La Scala, or I'd have phoned the good news. I would have been premature. The next morning eight little clusters of cells lay in the dish, going about the business of becoming tiny Uspendskys.

"Let's hope it doesn't happen again," I said. "That's all she ordered."

"I think I'll change the nutrients," the tech said. "It's hard to imagine what we'd do with the extras."

Whether it was the change of nutrients, or whether the clones had some sort of cellular knowledge of how many of them were wanted, the divisions stopped there. In the speeded-up method our lab had pioneered, we soon had eight culture jars labeled *Uspendsky* lined up on a shelf, bathed in

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dim light and with eight exchange units whisperingly doing the work of the placentas.

"Weird," the tech said. "It's like watching a chorus line."

It was, a little. When one fetus kicked, they all kicked. When one swallowed, they all swallowed. They were thumb-suckers all. And when they were decanted and weighed, there was only a half a gram difference between the largest and the smallest. That's a difference of .015 percent, which isn't a whopping lot, as babies go.

The chorus line moved into the nursery, and after a week madame took them home.

"I want my money back," she said.

"Look, you got what you ordered," I argued. "I didn't give you any warranties, and you've had them six years. Eight copies of yourself, perfect in every way."

"*Not* perfect in every way," Madame Uspendsky snapped. "They do everything together. *Everything*. Every motion, word, thought. You can't send one downstairs after your needlepoint without having all of them go. You can't set one to dust in the dining room and another to scrub the kitchen counter, because they're all lined up there doing the same thing."

I shrugged.

"*Do* something."

"Maybe you could turn them into precision dancers," I suggested, thinking of the chorus line.

"Not a chance. They all do the *same thing*, I tell you. They go along a sidewalk like a flock of marching starlings. They can't even *say* different things — they all talk at once, in unison. Absolutely perfect. The Met chorus should be so good." Madame fell silent, her face taking on the lines of someone who has just had a striking idea. "I'll see you again later," she mumbled, and left.

I jumped to my computer for a search of the literature.

Hours later, I sat back, exhausted. No one had ever reported a phenomenon like this among clones: the first lizards cloned in the nineteen seventies had behaved like ordinary lizards that happened to share a pattern of spots. No one had had a chorus of frogs: they barrumphed in the same ragged way as their cousins down at the local pond. A similar phenomenon had been reported a couple of times from identical twins, who are of course a sort of clone, but even *they* didn't do the same things at the same time; they just talked in unison. One could wash and the other dry and they'd get the dishes done, if you see what I mean. Madame Uspendsky's eight girls couldn't even do that. As cheap, permanent servants, they were a total bust. But madame wasn't going to get all that lovely green back.

For one thing, I'd spent it all.

So I was relieved to see her solution to her problem on the videocube a

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few weeks later: she'd made her clones into a choir.

They sang beautifully, as well they should. They might not have had the years of training that had helped make madame's voice one of the wonders of the western world, but they had her vocal apparatus and could hit the high notes perfectly. Sounded pretty good, in fact, though something seemed to be missing that I couldn't put my finger on. Expression? No, they had plenty of expression. What, then?

The music critics knew, of course. There was no harmony. The Uspendsky Unison choir was panned in every newspaper, videocube and radio in the nation. Back to square one for madame, I thought. Too bad.

But I reckoned without her determination. This morning she was here again, with a friend.

"This is Diana," she said, smiling slightly as she stacked up the cash.

"Pleased to meet you," I said nervously, grabbing at the greenbacks as they began to slide into my lap. "Er, what can I do for you?"

"I think six would be enough," madame said. "Don't you? Oh, of course, you wouldn't know. You're a doctor, not a musician."

"Six what?" I asked, feeling apprehensive.

"Six Dianas, of course." The ringed hands stopped counting and a few bills floated to the floor.

"Madame Uspendsky," I said. "Remember what happened last time. I have no idea what caused it, and I have no idea how to control it."

The ringed hand subtracted a fifty from the stack of cash. "Cab fare," madame explained, with a small smile.

"You have to understand that I can't guarantee that the Dianas won't do the same thing as the others," I said urgently. "They might well turn out to be synchronized in the same way, and then you'd have the problem of six people dusting your dining room at once all over again."

"Oh, I was hoping they would turn out that way," Madame Uspendsky said. "That would save everything."

"Save everything?" I said blankly.

"Diana's a mezzosoprano," madame said. "Her voice is a perfect blend with mine. That will be enough of a choir to go on with, and I think I have a line on a tenor...."

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David Redd is an occasional contributor ("Morning," July 1978) who tells us that he has wanted to write this story for nearly twenty years. "Since making the original notes about the house and its people I've been a postman, highway technician and freelance writer; I've travelled in Scandinavia and done work for several multinational energy companies." Mr. Redd lives in Wales with his wife and two children.

The House On Hollow Mountain

BY
DAVID REDD

The house ticked and hummed around us.

It was a place built for people. Everything about the house smelt old, not decaying or locked-away antique old but a much lived-in and much loved old. The carpets were faded to just the right tones, the curtains were flowered and friendly looking, and our cloth lampshades made the modern electric lights look respectable. The house was a timeless and reassuring place where you could wake up in the morning and feel secure. That was the most important thing about the house: in it you could feel secure.

I went with Derek to wake up our new guest.

We came up the stairs, past the wicker table on the landing and into the little bedroom where Michael Aristiades lay sleeping. He was in a bed with white pillows and a fawn eiderdown. I pulled the curtains aside. In the morning sunlight cattle were grazing on the slopes of Hollow Mountain, and beyond the trees I saw the red and grey roofs of the town. This view could be nicely soothing for visitors who needed soothing.

Derek gestured with his hand just *so*, and the sedative beam faded out. Quite naturally, Michael Aristiades awoke.

"Hi," I said. "Welcome to the House."

As our new guest opened his eyes and absorbed our appearance, I introduced us to him. The chubby, fair, curly-haired one nearest to him was me. "I'm Kelly, and this is Derek." He nodded to Aristiades. Derek was tall and dark. The two of us dress casually, open-neck shirts and simple colors, and we do our best to look like ordinary neighbors. We smile a lot.

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Aristiades said nothing. He was small and tanned. He had the fine, sensitive features I'd noticed in several old families of his country. He raised himself to sit up against his pillows; he looked around the rose-patterned wallpaper to the dark wooden door. Clearly he didn't trust us yet. That was all right. Like most new guests he was comparing his memory with his present surroundings, and finding some discrepancies.

I said, "Usually we have two nurses here, but things are quiet just now and Becky's away for a couple of days. Our other nurse is Julia. Nice girl. She'll be up to see you in a few minutes." I liked to mention the word "nurse" early, because it was a good word for reassuring people. As soon as the people seemed reassured enough to be peaceable, we'd let the girls attend to them.

Aristiades asked, "Where am I?"

I gave him a good friendly smile. "This is a kind of halfway house, where people can rest awhile and get patched up if they need it."

Aristiades thought about that and appeared to accept it. I knew there was nothing in the bedroom to alarm him. We two men might be strangers, but the house was on our side. Details like the brass oil-lamp on the shelf and the pastel landscape pictures on the far wall gave an impression of permanence and personal care. People in this house did not throw things out simply because the things were old or valueless or no longer useful. People kept things and gave them a place. People cared.

"How did I get here?"

"I can't say exactly," I said, "but I guess when you need to know, you'll find out."

Derek took over on cue to cut off further questions. "Your name is Michael Aristiades. I'm hoping to get some newspapers from your part of the world, but they take time to come through."

"Newspapers?" He showed excitement for the first time. "Is there any news of my — of the attempt —"

"I've been told a few things," said Derek. This was where visitors started believing him. "Your bomb exploded prematurely in the tunnel, and their President was unharmed. You don't realize yet what a lucky escape you had. A body was found. Officially, Michael Aristiades, you're dead."

"A body? But I was alone in the tunnel! Nobody else crossed the border with me! Nobody!"

I chipped in. "Easy now, Michael, calm down. I don't know too much about how they arrange these things —" which was almost true — "but I imagine they planted something for the troops to find."

Derek added, "It's safer if none of us know the who and how of your escape. Just accept that somewhere there are people, not necessarily on your side, who don't want you to die."

He was quiet for a time. It must have occurred to him that he was out of the war, because he asked:

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"Where do I go from here?"

"Obviously you can't go back to your own country," said Derek. "It would be too dangerous for you, and too dangerous for our own people over there. No, you rest here for a couple of days and decide where to go next. We'll help you."

The house was a good place in which to rest. Faintly, from under the floorboards, I heard something whirr.

Aristiades seemed more relaxed. He looked at the two of us, nodding his head. "So this house is part of an escape network —"

A telephone bell sounded, downstairs. Derek said a very swift "pardon me" to us and vanished through the door. I kept my inner frown away from my face.

"That call could be a warning," said Aristiades darkly. "Could I have been followed here? Or could one of your other — ah, your other visitors have been followed?"

This wasn't the moment to explain that the house didn't have any normal telephone in it.

"Nobody ever gets followed here," I said. "We guarantee it. That's why we accept only very special cases. I guess there's a lull in the hostilities just now — you're the only one with us today. But you'd know more about the war than I would. When the fighting starts up again, we'll be rushed off our feet."

My words were less important than my tone, soothing and gently rhythmic. It lulled people nicely.

"You'll want to know how soon you can get up," I went on. "Julia's coming to give you a check-up first, then she'll fix you something to eat. After that, you can go get some sunshine in the garden anytime. The door's always open."

That surprised him. "Open? Not locked?"

"Open." I grinned. "You're safe here. There's only one door kept locked in this house, and that's the basement door, because we've got some rather special electrical gear down there. Even for the basement we keep the key hanging on the wall right beside the door. It's the original open-house here. No other guests around today, so look around wherever you like."

Derek returned in a hurry. "Did I hear you say no other guests, Kelly? Cancel that. We've got one coming in right now."

He glanced at Aristiades, then at me. I nodded. Derek moved his hand just *so*.

"Julia's on her way up," he said to Aristiades. "Sorry about us having to dash off, but people often come in badly hurt. If you want anything, ask Julia."

We passed her on the stairs, Julia coming up as we were going down. She was wearing the white dress that was not quite a uniform, and carrying a little medical wallet. She smiled at us. The tests would keep Aristiades occu-

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pied until the next visitor was through and, more important, give Julia an opportunity to work on his psychology.

We had this whole operation all worked out, and we were proud of it. Of course there were other people behind us, most of them far more expert technically than we were, and there were even other similar houses dotted across the world. But *this* house was ours, and we ran it as lovingly and sympathetically as we could. The people we helped always agreed our job was worthwhile, once they came to see things our way.

And if they didn't see things our way, if they still showed interest in hatred and wars and other criminal activities, we had to change their minds. The house helped us.

We reached the massive basement door I'd mentioned to Aristiades. A gesture *so* from Derek, and the door slid aside frame and all. The key beside it was for selected visitors, not for us. In the passage beyond were two more doors, the first labeled in huge black letters HEADQUARTERS ROUTE — DO NOT ENTER. We took the second door, which was unlabeled.

Our workroom: fluorescent tubes, white cabinets, banks of dials and controls, a couple of consoles with headsets, and a raised turntable affair which looked remarkably like an operating theatre. This part of the house wasn't so reassuring, but it was necessary. Here the humming of the house was very loud.

On our way down Derek had told me about our next visitor, a General Wolf Best. The lifeline probability tracer predicted accidental death in a motor crash, within five minutes. Not sabotage nor hostile action, but a simple everyday accident. We got three or four of them every week, and I preferred them to the war victims.

"The trouble is," Derek said as we entered our basement workroom, "he won't believe the usual story. He'll scream kidnap the second he wakes up."

"Pull the life-or-death operation stunt," I said. "He and Aristiades are on opposite sides — it'll be the only way we can make them trust each other quickly enough."

"I don't like it. We're going to lie to him and make him despair of living."

"He'll find out the truth soon enough. You're supposed to be the man who knows all — get busy on him."

Unpleasant things had to be faced and dealt with, not retreated from. I knew Derek would do it.

I pulled out white coats for the two of us, and we shrugged into them. I put on dark-rimmed spectacles to appear more studious. For this confrontation we needed to look competent rather than friendly. Derek used a headset briefly to seek out the innermost secret ambition in the general's mind.

"So that's why the machine picked him up." Derek put down the headset. "That makes me feel a little better.

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He'll understand why we did it, one day."

The last seconds ticked away. Far beyond the slopes of Hollow Mountain, General Best was being chauffeured at dizzying speed down other mountain heights. A large black automobile, a narrow dusty track. His driver curving into a hairpin bend just a fraction too fast —

I felt sorry for the driver. It was a pity the machines only accepted people who would make the most of a second life.

Impact. A naked man appeared under the lights of the turntable, bathed in sedative and anesthetic beams. This was the general. Simultaneously, from somewhere beyond the door marked HEADQUARTERS, a close imitation of a human body materialized in a shattered and burning car.

The rest was up to us.

Some of the instruments around the turntable were more complex than they seemed. I blanked off all feeling from his limbs, leaving his head and his vocal muscles untouched. I planted a nasty ache in his chest. Then, pulling a white sheet over his torso, I let him awake.

"General Best," Derek said softly. "Can you hear me?"

The general's eyes came open. "Yes, I can hear you. Where am I? The car went off the road — that fool Luigi —"

"We haven't much time, general. The life-support system is keeping you alive so far, but it's touch and go. Can you feel anything in your legs?"

"No ... nor my arms! Are they —"

"They're still there, but useless. Fortunately your brain is unaffected. We can save your life, I think...."

He couldn't do anything but listen. Derek went on softening him up with our chosen story, about his only chance of life being a risky experimental procedure banned by most medical authorities. Derek was good. I could be warm-hearted and sincere, but Derek could be convincing. He came swiftly to the climax.

"You must face facts, general. Even if this operation succeeds, you'll be a physical wreck — a total cripple in an army which has no use for cripples. But as I've already explained, this operation is illegal and unethical, and for the present we can't allow you to remain in your own country."

The general sighed — I'd given him some chest pains to speed his decision — but his voice was firm. "I understand the situation perfectly. Please turn off my life-support system."

Bringing him to this decision was the part Derek hated. I didn't like it much myself. But it was the only thing that could release General Best from his previous life.

"Even a cripple can do useful work," Derek said. "Think for a moment, general. I have a colleague working down south among the native villages. Half the children there die before they reach the age of three, the

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farms are small and primitive, the houses are only filthy huts. The villagers need help desperately. They need someone to teach them simple hygiene and medicine, how to improve their tools and farms.... And a cripple could teach them, General Best. Even a wreck of a man could show them what they need to know. If you survive this operation, if you allow us to operate on you that is, will you consider going to help them?"

For the tracer had shown us this: the general's inner dream was very different from the general's outer life.

"You can't mean it," he whispered to Derek. "You're offering me the impossible. I must be imagining it."

"You're between life and death, general. We want you to live. But the only life possible to you now will be very different from your old life. It won't be easy. You'll be an exile working for suspicious and ungrateful primitives. Can you face it?"

The general nodded.

We'd got him. Instantly I flicked on the anesthetic beam. A two-second burst would put him out for ten minutes.

Derek's usual reaction was to search his conscience. He leaned forward on the turntable, head down in his hands.

"Snap out of it," I told him. "We've got to get the general upstairs."

We dressed him in plain silk pajamas. Then, using the mighty technology which had snatched him from the point of death half a continent away, we transmitted him from the basement up to a bedroom. This was one use for the machines which Headquarters hadn't figured out yet.

Derek moved slowly. Probably he couldn't forget the words: "Please turn off my life-support system."

"Look, I'll handle the rest of this," I said. Derek was better when we were rushed — when things weren't so busy he tended to let himself worry. "You go on up to Aristiades before Julia runs out of tests for him. I'll see to the general."

"But I ought to — yeah, have it your way, Kelly." Moodily he came out of the basement with me. Julia would be able to work on him better than I could; she and Derek were getting closer and closer these days.

I waited alone in the general's bedroom. He was going to wake up with some genuine bruises and aches, because the crumpling car had just started to crush his body when the machines took him. Most of our visitors arrived with minor injuries like this. Aristiades had lost a fair-sized patch of skin from his back as the bomb went off, but with the house empty we'd had time to regenerate his skin while he slept. Usually we didn't have time. With the general we'd had the time but I'd done nothing — deliberately. I wanted him to feel bruised, to feel like he'd been through an operation. The bruises would partly convince him, and the calm friendly atmosphere of

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the house would do the rest.

I saw him awake, then opened the embroidered curtains to let in the sunlight. Sometimes it was good if the guest saw us looking busy. "Good morning, general." As an afterthought I pulled down the top window-pane so he could hear the sparrows twittering under the eaves. You felt safe in a house with sparrows.

He was lifting his head and looking around the room, gazing at the old china water-jug, at the wallpaper (maybe that rose pattern *was* even more faded than usual) and at the polished wooden wardrobe. He said, "I had an operation, but this doesn't look like a hospital ward. It's more like my maiden aunt's house...."

He looked at me. I was still wearing the white coat and glasses.

"The operation," he said. "You were there. So I remember correctly."

I said smoothly, "The arrangements for your new life are well in hand, general. I'm sure the villagers are looking forward to your coming. But there's one very important thing I have to tell you first."

He knew when not to refuse bait. He bit. "Tell me."

"Your operation was a success," I said.

"Obviously. I am here and alive."

"It was a *complete* success. Complete. You're fully cured, General Best. You're not a cripple. You're one of the luckiest people on earth; you're a healthy normal man."

Maybe I wasn't as convincing as Derek, but I was certainly sincere.

After a few more explanations I left General Best with the promise that a nurse would see him shortly. He didn't say much, but he had a lot to think about. Already he was looking less like a general.

When we went down to the kitchen for lunch, our guests were reasonably happy in their rooms. They'd had something to eat. Aristiades was reading an old-seeming newspaper which mentioned a bomb explosion near the President. General Best was looking through an information file about the job we'd lined up for him. The machines gave our individual folders for all new arrivals who needed them, matching the right work to the right person, and usually the papers fitted our refugee-and-new-identity story pretty well. I hadn't given Aristiades his file yet; it was a special one.

Our kitchen was wide and airy, with woven rush matting and warm rugs over the stone floor. It had pine-wood tables and shelving. I started laying out knives and forks, while Derek went to the icebox for drinks. Julia arrived in the white dress that was not quite a uniform. Becky was still away visiting her family. So there were only the three of us here today. Julia opened the cast-iron oven door of the antique range and slotted three dinners into the microwave. Ham and eggs, peas, French fries. We lived not luxuriously but comfortably. Derek wore the

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slightly floating expression which meant that he and Julia had time to think about each other.

"Peaceful here these days," I remarked.

"Wait until the counterattack starts over there," said Derek. "It won't be long now."

Over the food we discussed Aristiades and Best.

"I like them both," said Julia.

"Yes, good men," said Derek. "All we have to do is steer them together and let them find things out for themselves. Kelly, I think we've got time to let them find the basement."

I shrugged. "Why not? Aristiades needs to know, and it'll give Best something to remember."

We agreed on it. Our two guests wouldn't be in any danger, of course — the house would see to that — but it'd be an interesting afternoon for them. I believed it would change their lives.

And after our little strategy discussion we had apple pie and cream. My personal favorite was cherry pie, but Julia knew better than to serve up cherry pie every day. On Sunday and by special request, that was all, and the request had to be very special. Living together in just the right way was very important to us.

Afterwards it was my turn to wash up.

The afternoon was great. Aristiades met Best. Cautiously they got to know each other. We showed them all around the house from the attic to the kitchen and then let them wander out into the garden without us. They could see that there was no other house for miles, not between here and the town. I had played up the lack of a normal telephone as something sinister. (The real reason for its absence was to prevent any warning calls to future accident locations; secrecy was our main protection.) We could hear the two of them talking about their situation — about them being on opposite sides, about us, and about their future. Aristiades wondered what we had in mind for him. They discussed what they knew about the house and decided they didn't entirely trust us. Which was exactly what we wanted, for now.

Midafternoon I helped Julia carry out some sandwiches and coffee to the garden tables. Julia had brought wine glasses but no wine. (Too obvious, I'd said, but I'd been outvoted.)

Our guests were in a heavy discussion, and it was definitely time we diverted them:

"You were misled, Michael. Assassinating our President would not have stopped the war, not after the border atrocities."

"No? You may think me a fool for what I tried to do, but I only wanted to end the killing —"

Aristiades broke off as we arrived with the sandwiches. He noticed the glasses on Julia's tray and asked us about wine. "Unless you don't permit it?"

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"Sure, you can have what you like," I said. "Trouble is, we both have to attend to something else just now. Why don't you pick up some drinks yourselves from our cellar? It's right along the kitchen corridor, just past that locked basement door I told you about."

I couldn't give them clearer instructions without drawing them a map. Quickly the two of us went inside. Julia giggled at me and vanished to her room; I hurried down to the basement. Amidst the white cabinets and humming lifeline machines Derek was watching the TV monitors.

"Sit down, Kelly. Watch the show."

"Did you warn Parrish he might have visitors?"

"Yes. He okayed it, but we'll have to pull them back if anything big breaks."

I glanced at the controls. He'd set up an automatic recall system which could be triggered by either of us. So now everything was ready and waiting for our two guests. I sat back in front of a screen and watched them arrive.

On their way to the wine cellar they looked hard at the basement door. On their way back, each holding a cobwebbed bottle, they looked hard at the door again. They stopped. They talked. Then, as I'd expected, Aristiades was the one to take down the key.

While they were unlocking the door I switched to a different camera. On the monitor screen I saw them enter the middle passage. They paused at the door marked HEADQUARTERS ROUTE — DO NOT ENTER.

A couple of inches from my elbow, an electric bell trilled suddenly. I jumped for the nearest lifeline tracer but Derek beat me to it. This was a hell of a time for someone else to come through.

On the screen the image of Best said, "Headquarters, eh? This could be a good place to get some answers."

I saw him try the door. It opened.

Derek said, "Kelly, it could be a bad one."

All violent deaths were bad ones. "Soon?"

"In fifteen minutes. A fire in an old folks' home."

At least the war casualties hadn't started coming in again, which was the thought that had frightened me. "Who is it? One of the old folk or a fireman?"

"One of the staff, a nurse. She's going to get trapped in the fire."

Aristiades and Best went through the door. What appeared to be a featureless white passage stretched away before them. They weren't surprised, because we'd told them previously about the limestone caves which gave Hollow Mountain its name. Those two were so accustomed to wartime bunkers that they thought it quite logical to site Headquarters underground.

They started walking down the passage. Meanwhile I was thinking about the fire and the trapped nurse.

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"Well, they've got fifteen minutes," I said. "If they're not back before she comes through, we'll have to pull them in."

Derek nodded. He had the headset half on. "It's a wing full of old ladies — geriatric cases. Curtains drawn to keep out the sun, most of them half asleep. Nobody realizes there's a fire yet."

This sort of thing hit me the worst. If they'd allowed us phones, I'd have been on the line straightaway warning that home about the fire. Which was why they didn't allow us telephones, of course. Derek would check out the fire situation periodically. Meanwhile, we had to see what was happening at Headquarters. I sat down at my console and listened into the mind of Michael Aristiades.

Aristiades was worried about the wine bottles. He and Best were still carrying them. They contained excellent wines, and he didn't want them broken or left lying around. But a bottle of wine was a definite handicap on a spying mission. Around him the passage changed. It was now lined with opaque glass partitions, and from it other passages branched off in several directions. Aristiades felt that he was getting somewhere. Parts of the walls here and there had sliding doors and little panels with switches in them. He wished he were carrying microphones and cameras rather than a dusty wine bottle.

"Over there," Best said, pointing. "A clear window."

Aristiades and Best peered through the square of clear glass. The room inside seemed to be an office; a few men were head-down busy at desks with papers and keyboards.

"It looks innocent," said Best.

"Let's find some more windows," said Aristiades.

They looked into a couple of similar offices, then into some rooms that were obviously hospital wards. Once they had to dodge back while a woman in blue walked past. Aristiades still wasn't satisfied. None of this showed him who was running the operation.

A white-coated man came down the corridor before Aristiades and Best could hide again. He smiled. "Ah, you two'll do. We might need some extra hands for a minute. Come along to the reception center — it won't take long."

(I said, "That's one of Parrish's boys. Must be something going on he wants our two to see. How's that old folks' home now?")

("Burning," said Derek. He sounded grim.)

Aristiades was tense and wary. He had to let the man guide him on. The bottle of wine in his hand seemed dreadfully out of place here, but there was nowhere he could dispose of it.

He found himself with Best on the sidelines of a wide glass-sided room, watching two men check medical instruments in the center. The place smelt sterile. A large turntable affair

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had something resembling a human body stretched out on it. Aristiades stared at the body, trying to see it clearly. Despite the bright overhead lights the outline of the human figure seemed oddly blurred and imprecise. His guide must have noticed him looking at the thing.

"Don't worry, that's only the blank. The patient hasn't come through yet." And Aristiades nodded as if he understood.

In the reception center something ticked. The lights grew brighter.

Aristiades saw the body flicker and vanish. He just had time to wonder where it had gone, and then a different shape appeared on the turntable. It was a man, clearly visible and seemingly alive, with his limbs twisted into odd positions. The two attendants straightened him out. Aristiades wondered what kind of machine could juggle that way with human beings; a part of him wanted to scream.

"That's it, you weren't needed after all." The man shrugged at Aristiades. "The tricky rescues work out okay sometimes. Slick timing on that one — the local houses couldn't have saved him. A good blank too, one of the new models."

Rescues? New models? Aristiades exchanged glances with Best. "We'd better be running along now."

"Going off duty, huh? Thanks for offering to help. Carry on — I'll wait here with the boys." And their guide obligingly turned his back on them.

Moving slowly from the room, Aristiades wondered if he dared explore any further. Already they'd been in this Headquarters place for some length of time. Perhaps they should return to the house — persumably one of the "local houses" — before anyone back there missed them.

He and Best had just left the reception center when they saw the alien coming down the passage.

They backed away. Aristiades pretended to be examining his wine bottle — it was all he could think to do, with that bizarre figure heading past him into the room where a blank had vanished and a man appeared.

The being was a tall red column of translucent protoplasm, with darker ribs within. It had a nest of tentacles surrounding a blank white dome where its head should have been, and it slid effortlessly towards the turntable, its red body shimmering and shining like gelatin. Aristiades had seen nothing like it before.

It spoke: softly modulated hissing words to the attendants.

"I see he is here. Is he unharmed?"

"No injuries. We're treating his skin for minor abrasions."

"I am pleased. It is good that his knowledge has not been lost to your people. I wish to speak with him when he awakes."

The being came out again, gliding across the floor in crimson majesty, past Aristiades and Best, away down the corridor. They watched it go.

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"I've seen enough for now," said Best.

"So have I," said Aristiades. "Let's go back to the house. I felt safer there."

Kelly," said Derek, "things are bad in the home."

"I'll take a look." I disengaged myself from Michael Aristiades, who had just had his first sight of a Vengarian, and I plugged in a headset to the dying nurse.

She was really struggling. It took me a moment to make sense of what was happening. The place was full of shadows, sharp choking smoke, heat and fire crackling around her. Some of the women were trying to crawl from their chairs — the nurse had hold of someone who could walk and was helping her towards the stairs as best she could. Could I ever be that dedicated in such circumstances? She knew what was going to happen to her, but she was determined to get as many of them out as she could. I loved her then — I loved them all when they were facing the end. She could hardly breathe. Flames were coming up the stairs.

I checked the time forecast, and whistled. "Mother of God! She's coming through exactly when those two are going to arrive back with us!"

Derek nodded. "I said things were bad."

"You'll have to head them off. I'll see to the girl." I made a hand signal so. "Julia? Kelly. Accident coming through any minute now. He — elp!"

Her voice sounded in the air. "I'm on my way."

Julia and Aristiades and Best reached us together. She was wearing a beach wrap and had a towel around her head — my SOS must have pulled her out of the shower. Derek let her in and pushed Aristiades and Best back out.

"Upstairs please, gentlemen. I'd like you to tell me what you're doing down here —" A good opening. He'd handle them okay.

The door closed. Julia joined me at the console. Wet strands of hair coiled around her face. "How long?"

"A minute. Listen in. HQ are standing by — if she gets burned as badly as I think, we'll have to shunt her straight over for treatment."

Julia held a headset to one ear. She listened.

The nurse was taking a long time to die in that fire. So were the old ladies.

In the last seconds before transfer, a voice spoke. My nerves were bad. I nearly jumped off my seat.

"Kelly, you'll have to keep her with you." It was Parrish. "We're having trouble with her tissue types. Hold her there until we can get an exact match."

"Will do," I said, and my heart shriveled. Julia looked at me in dismay.

Then she arrived. She'd been pretty once; I could tell that from what was left of her face. Something heavy and red-hot must have fallen across her, be-

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because the rest of her body wasn't so good. Burn victims are some of the worst.

We sprayed her with jelly to seal in her remaining fluids and to try beginning the regeneration. Of course, any healing process we could start would be much too slow — before her tissues were a quarter restored she'd be dead. All we could do was hook up various life-supports, plus enriched plasma feeds into her body, and hope that she could hold on. The first plasma feed we tried wouldn't take. Neither would the second. Matching was a real problem. I had to filter out most of the regen molecules to get anything at all into her. There were all these shining instruments around me and none of them were much help.

I remembered my brief glimpses of her mind, of the things she'd thought and done with flames all around her. Girls like that weren't meant to die young. I was doing all I could for her, but I had that sick feeling inside which meant I knew I couldn't do enough. If Parrish didn't deliver the goods very quickly indeed —

Parrish delivered. "Matching complete. We're ready for her."

I shunted her through with a speed which bettered my previous record. The turntable emptied. I reached for Julia and hugged her, wet hair and all. Sometimes we have so many people coming in that we don't have time to think deeply about each one, but today I'd had time to think about the nurse. I wanted her to live, just as she'd wanted the old ladies to live.

The lifeline probabilty tracer went on recording the terrible progress of the fire. More subjects available, but none suitable for transfer— The heartless machine!

After five endless minutes Parrish called back: "She'll be all right. Tissues blending in nicely. Thanks, Kelly, Julia. A few days' rest, and she'll be fine."

"She can do her recuperating here with us," I offered quickly. "Things are quiet here just now."

"Right, you look after her." Parrish sounded amused. "I'll send her through in about an hour." He signed off.

Julia was frowning at me. "Kelly, you didn't have to reserve her a room here *quite* so eagerly. Just because she's young and blonde!"

"You're too suspicious," I protested. "I maybe liked the look of her, but that's all. Really, I'm a perfect gentleman inside."

"Oh, sure, Kelly! You can prove you're a gentleman right now — clean up the turntable while I go finish my shower!"

I'd walked into that one and couldn't back out. The messy job of washing away our spray debris was now dumped on me. Still, Julia was a great girl. I couldn't understand what she saw in Derek.

I had an hour to wait before the nurse came back to us. Tidying up the basement didn't take long. So I went

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upstairs and met Aristiades and Best in the lounge. They were relaxing in the comfortable old armchairs. Aristiades was reading an information file and looking thoughtful.

I sat down on the leather settee and grinned at them. "Everything all right?"

"Fine," they said together, in a good imitation of Derek's tones. He must have given them the full works in his explanations.

I chuckled and gave a satisfied nod. "And the war, General Best? You don't regret leaving your country now when it seems to need you?"

"My absence will not alter the course of the war. I have another country now. My grandfather was the first white man in this region you have chosen for me — did you know that? In my heart I have always longed to go out and continue his work, and at last it has become possible."

"That's nice," I said, and meant it. "We try to put everyone in just the right place."

"I understand now," said Aristiades, "that your organization is not the simple refugee escape route I assumed it to be."

He was holding his file open. I pointed to it. "Michael, I think you'll find that really we *are* a kind of escape route after all. In a way you're all refugees — from death, and from your old lives. We give you a second chance."

"I shall make full use of the chance, believe me. When Derek invited me to join you, I accepted at once. But, Kelly, there's something about my new work which these papers don't explain. Where, exactly, is Headquarters?"

So he'd figured out that our basement passages didn't lead into any caves. He was sharp. Derek hadn't told him enough to satisfy him.

"I can't tell you where Headquarters is because I don't know," I said. It wasn't my business to know. "But my guess is that Headquarters isn't any single place — it's more likely several different places all linked together, like our basement is linked to it. That's a guess, I could be wrong. You'll have to ask someone who knows, when you start with the Vengarians."

"I see you do not give up secrets easily." Aristiades frowned, but seemed to accept what I'd said. He looked down at his briefing file and resumed reading. I decided this was the right moment for me to go, before he thought up any more awkward questions.

"See you later," I said. "Got another guest coming in real soon now." I headed for the door. With luck I could persuade Julia to have me instead of Derek with her when that blonde nurse arrived.

I was halfway down the stairs when somebody tapped my shoulder.

Aristiades had followed me out from the lounge. "I need to know more about your organization," he said. "We can speak privately in my room."

One glance at his stern face told me

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this was a crisis. If I couldn't convince Aristiades that he belonged with us, we might lose him completely. I nodded. "All right, your room. We'll talk." The doubt continuing in his mind was a potential bomb that needed defusing at once.

In his bedroom we stood facing each other warily. The homely surroundings, the curtains and the brass bedstead and the old pictures on the wall, somehow failed to have their usual soothing effect on me. Was I risking too much in trying to handle Aristiades without help?

He spoke first:

"I want to know the truth, Kelly. You've described what happens here and how your machines rescue dying people such as myself — but you haven't explained *why* you do it. If it is not a matter of religious belief or profit or patriotism, then your motivation is a mystery to me."

I stared at him in honest surprise. "So you don't understand why we want to save lives?" I could tell him *that* easily enough. "Haven't you ever heard of volunteer rescue squads before? I mean, people who go down collapsing mines or take lifeboats to sinking ships, people who see a need for saving lives and decide to do something about it? We're like that here. Look, Michael, I don't like seeing people die. I think every time someone dies it's a terrible waste because life means so much! *That's* why I try to help people like you here!"

"Kelly, Kelly, I do not doubt your own sincerity." His tone was calm, then changed suddenly. "But are the rest of the people in your organization sincere?"

"What do you mean?"

"Myself, I share your views on the need to end a senseless loss of life. But only an hour ago I saw your Headquarters; I saw one of those alien monsters that govern you. The Vengarians, you call them. They are not in any way human, so why should such beings wish to help us? What is their *real* reason for setting up this bizarre organization?" Aristiades moved closer. "You haven't answered me yet, Kelly. You're going to tell the truth to me now though, even if I am compelled to smash it out of you by force —"

"Hold on, don't get hasty." I backed away and frantically wondered what to do.

When he threatened to use force I was sure he meant it. All able-bodied citizens in his country were trained to become skilled and deadly fighters. The possibilities weren't good. What if I hand-signaled the autobeam for anesthetic? Knocking him out would save my skin all right, but Aristiades would never trust anybody in the House again. He'd never work with us after that, and I wouldn't blame him one bit. No, I didn't dare use a beam or anything like it. But the only alternative was to tell him something I didn't even know myself! I'd already said that both humans and Vengarians were here be-

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cause there were lives that needed saving. That was the simple truth. Aristiades had been blown up by his own bomb while trying to end a war. Couldn't he accept that a good many other people were as appalled by waste of life as he was himself?

Desperately I reminded him of the facts he'd read in his briefing file. About the House, the visitors, about Headquarters and the Vengarians ... about machines that rescued only people who gave more than most to the world ... about operators screaming under the strain of warning messages they hadn't been allowed to send ... about the national leaders whose selfish hunger for power forced us to work in absolute secrecy.... I reminded him about all these things, and still he wasn't convinced. I discovered I was sweating.

"Damn you, Michael Aristiades!" He was coming towards me again, restlessly and threateningly. "I've told you everything! What more do you want to know?"

"I cannot believe that the Vengarians are here merely to help humanity. Our forms must seem as strange to their eyes as their bodies seem strange to us. *Why are they here?*"

"To help us," I said wearily, and as I said it I imagined him snapping back: But why are they helping *us?* With that thought my brain began functioning at last.

Suddenly I realized that I had an answer for Aristiades, and in the same instant I realized that the answer in itself wasn't enough. The Vengarians had set up the Houses for a reason so obvious, and so discomforting to humans, that nobody ever put it into words. All I had to do now was tell him that simple reason —

— except that I'd told him so much already, he wouldn't entirely trust whatever I told him now. Words alone wouldn't be enough to remove his doubts. That penetrating, inquiring mind of his would be a tremendous asset to us, if only I could win him over; for the first time in his life he'd found a group of people who fully shared his philosophy, and he was still unable to convince himself that we were genuine.

The means of convincing him had been within my reach all the time, I thought, kicking myself mentally for forgetting the obvious. Our machines had helped General Best to believe in a lie, so they could help Aristiades to believe in the truth.

"Down to the basement!" I cried, startling him with my sudden enthusiasm. "Come on!"

Doubtfully he followed me down to the room of white cabinets and humming machines. At the console I picked up one headset for myself and offered a second to Aristiades. "Put this on. It's for mind-to-mind contact — you're about to share some of my memories."

My statement was so outrageous, to anyone unfamiliar with our technol-

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ogy, that it made him smile for the first time in ages. "Kelly, you are unbelievable! Nevertheless, I have died once today. What is there left to fear?" And he put on the headset.

In a moment we started reliving my memories. I tried to recall a certain time and place as vividly as I could — mental pictures far more detailed and convincing than words could ever be. The time was five years ago. A huge and scarlet column of protoplasm — the Vengarian master K'llyryll — was speaking to me. Within moments, Michael Aristiades learned a single additional piece of information about the aliens. Or rather, about men.

The Vengarian explorers who had discovered Earth also discovered that we Earthly life forms were unique. On all other planets living creatures did not grow old or die — except in accidents or in conflict — but merely divided to reproduce and then continued as before, unchanging and undying ... Whereas on Earth the higher life forms had lost the protozoans' ability to divide and live forever, gaining instead a rapid evolution of species at the expense of personal extinction. It was monstrously unfair that all human beings were fated to die, while the lowliest and smallest amoeba was immortal.

Even on Earth people will give a lifeline to a drowning stranger. The immensely old and civilized Vengarians, when they found us being sucked down by death, had given us the Houses.

Suddenly contact was broken. I came back to the reality of our basement; Aristiades had pulled off his headset.

"Is this true?" he demanded. "Other things are immortal and we have to die?"

"I'm afraid that's right," I said. "Ask any of our biologists."

The more we learn about the uni-

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verse and ourselves, the more we learn that life needs protecting.

"A few minutes from now," I told him, "you're going to see someone else we saved — a nurse who died along with a dozen others because some fool started a fire. She was worth saving, so were you. I think I'd better ask you Derek's question again: Will you join us?"

Slowly he looked at me and nodded. I gasped with relief. People who genuinely valued life were so rare that we couldn't afford to lose a single recruit. Michael Aristiades had found his new place in the scheme of things.

The house ticked and hummed around us.

Afterwards, we all had coffee in the kitchen. Derek said, "Parrish called while you were busy — he said they're going to equip us with new machines and improved blanks. We'll be able to save a lot more accident cases."

"Great," I said. "And the war victims?"

"They'll go to a new House. We'll concentrate on accidental deaths."

Improvements again. That's good. The number of accidents that happen in the world, there's no end of people who need saving and guiding into new lives. The House on Hollow Mountain has work to do.

And why should it be only dying people we can save? What about all you living people out there, you people trapped in terrible situations or dead-end jobs or meaningless lives? Can't we find some kind of new life for *you*? Some longer and better life?

We're working on it.

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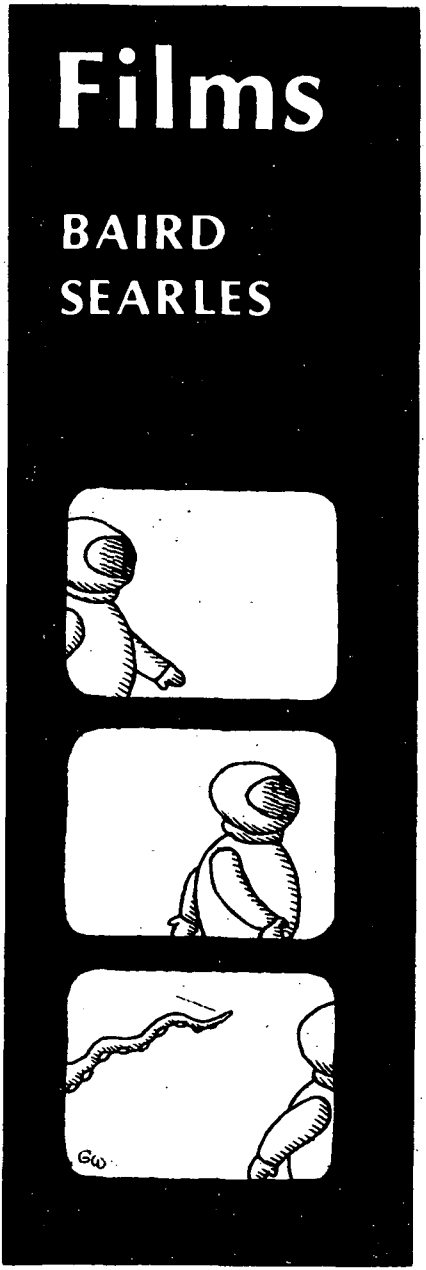
Films

BAIRD SEARLES



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

HOARY STORY

Before tackling the subject of this month's piece (what there is of it), an amendment to the last one, which was written on seeing the first two episodes of *Darkroom* about which, you may remember, I was not frightfully enthusiastic. The third was a step up, I must note in all fairness; the longer segment, particularly, about a child's toy soldiers that attack his militaristic father, was quite effective. The trick stuff was convincing (the miniarmy was contemporary, not antique, with tank and helicopter), and it was somehow much closer to having *now* what *The Twilight Zone* had *then*.

The boldness of giving *Ghost Story* that starkly generic title suggests that it will be epitomal, that it's not *a* ghost story, but *the* ghost story, stripped down to bare essentials and told to a fare-thee-well. But there can be a generically negative interpretation, too; the ghost story as hastily invented nonsense told around a summer-camp fire by subadolescents intent on scaring each other in the crudest possibly way. Guess which we got from the filmmakers?

(I am aware, of course, that the title came with the novel on which the film is supposedly based. I haven't read it, preferring to judge the film as film; I have heard good reports of it, as well as that the film script dispensed with a lot of its more complex aspects.)

The film's premise is certainly — er

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— basic. Young lady in the 1920s is accidentally done in by four young men. She returns in the present day to git 'em, unto the second generation (she goes after the two sons of one of the quartet).

Now I suppose a cinematic genius could take this simple idea and turn out a masterpiece of horror (one such, *The Innocents*, is based on nothing more complex). But simplicity becomes simple-mindedness when nothing in the way of style or intelligence is used in its realization.

I could go on for pages as to the lacks of this two-hour exercise in tedium, but I'm sure everyone, including myself, would just as soon I didn't. I'll cite just a couple of examples to justify my stand.

The lady's method of attack is to sneak up on the victim, repeat a remark from the gathering at which she met her end and, as they turn in dismay, appear in her current worm-eaten state of disrepair, at which they conveniently fall off a bridge or crash the car. To the two younger men, she suddenly appears in their lives (having obtained their addresses in Florida and New York City from some Netherworld detective agency [apparently) and seduces them; in these instances, she is her old pulchritudinous self. The elder bro, however, makes the mistake of standing too near the window-wall of his high rise apartment; she turns over in bed, and voila! — there's old Wormy. "Egad!" he yells, and falls over backwards. (To his doom, need I add?)

Younger bro, though, is of sterner stuff, and perhaps smelling something rotten (as well he might), he refuses to marry the lady, at which she picks up and leaves, lock, stock and worms, a peculiar move for one so tenacious.

Aside from inconsistent tenacity, we learn absolutely nothing about her, though we see a lot of her in the past and in the present (literally — her breasts become downright monotonous). She's an absolute cipher, and so her murderous reappearance has all the dramatic import of a falling brick. This is also true of a pair of escapees from a mental institution who are introduced into the action — a man and boy who make up a sort of gibbering Batman and Robin team — and who serve no purpose whatsoever. Their presence is a complete mystery.

The careers of the four actors who play the aged group who done her wrong, if laid end to end would stretch back to Congreve; one can only wonder, then, why they are so awful. The distinguished Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., gets done in early (probably much to his relief); Melvyn Douglas, never one to underact, outdoes himself; Fred Astaire proves that taking off the red shoes does not necessarily make one any better at delivering lines; and John Housman does his gruff old codger with a heart of flint act yet again.

The perfect ghost stories are those written by M.R. James early in this

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century; they are succinct, intelligent, atmospheric, and frightening. If this *Ghost Story* is the best we can do nowadays, maybe we'd better just give up the ghost.

Videowares dept. ... Newly available and of interest on videocassette are the following:

On the Beach, I've slowly come to realize, is one of the science fiction films I admire most. I don't really understand its lack of reputation; could it be because it has superstars, cost a lot of money, and was given the beautifully polished production that good films were given back then (the 1950s)? This story of a group of individuals in Australia, the last continent to support life after a nuclear war and eventually doomed themselves, is long, involving, and thoroughly unmelodramatic; I am always shattered by the final, harrowing scenes. The chance to see *On the Beach* uncut and uninterrupted on cassette makes the sometimes complicated matter of owning a VCR all worth it.

Here Comes Mr. Jordan is a 1940s exercise in whimsy about a boxer who dies before he's scheduled to, so the Heavenly Powers, personified by a Mr. Jordan (the impeccable Claude Rains) deposit him in another body to live his allotted span; the humor comes from the absolute inappropriateness of the body chosen, that of a wealthy dilettante. This was recently remade as *Heaven Can Wait* (also available on cassette), and while I think both versions are overly cute, I bring them up because it could be an imaginative piece of programming for your Phantasy Philm Phiends evening to rent both to show as a double feature. It would be fascinating to see how two different eras view the same material.

Bell, Book, and Candle was ahead of its time (mid-century) in being about working witchcraft in the 20th century, a subject that wouldn't have mass appeal until 25 years later. Therefore it had to be presented comedically, albeit with a certain amount of sophistication for its day. It's still a pleasure to watch, though, because of its cast: Kim Novak, giving a smoky performance as the young witch Gillian, forced to choose between love and her art, and a wonderful quartet of fellow coven members including Jack Lemmon, Ernie Kovaks, Hermione Gingold, and Elsa Lanchester. James Stewart is, of course, James Stewart as the befuddled mortal involved in the necromantic goings-on.

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Gordon Linzner lives in New York, works in a Wall Street commodity house, has sold several short stories to anthologies and to Twilight Zone, *and is the publisher of a small-press SF magazine,* Space and Time. *His first F&SF story concerns an encounter with a most remarkable life form.*

Sand

BY

GORDON LINZNER

Wilda paused in ankle-deep sand to adjust her pack. At the eastern horizon, the canopy of black turned smoky gray, tinged with pink. The moon had set an hour earlier. She turned to her winded companion, who'd shuffled to a halt beside her.

"Never been in the Dead Kingdom before, Markol?" she asked.

"Not far. Never on foot. Let's camp here. We've been marching most of the night."

"Oh, I think we could get in a few more hours before the day's heat becomes unbearable." Wilda smiled at his groan, to show him she was teasing. "It makes little difference. Yes, we'll stop here for the day."

Markol shrugged off his pack and sank to his haunches, reaching for the waterskin. He sipped gingerly. "We could have camped at moonset, at that water hole."

"Just where they'd look for us, especially if they found that horse you rode to death this evening. I've no love for the guardsmen of any city, that I should make their task easier."

"*We* rode it to death. The double burden was too much. It's your fault if they're still after us. It's not as if I actually got to take the jewels. You stabbed their commander."

"I pinked his shoulder. A scratch. How else could we get past the gates? That's hardly worth three days' chase through the nastiest territory in the Seven Kingdoms."

Markol studied her hard-set face. "Then you think we're safe? We're no longer being followed?"

"It seems unlikely. But I felt quite secure the night I earned this." Wilda touched the puckered scar on her right cheek. "I don't need a mate to it." She upended her own skin and took several

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long, deep swallows of water.

Markol licked his lips, sipped his own supply again. "Shouldn't we ration this stuff?"

Wilda laughed. "You *are* a novice! The body stores water. Drink as much as possible whenever you can. You'll not dry out any faster."

Markol fondled her leather-breeched knee. "There's something else you should do whenever you can."

She scowled. He withdrew hastily.

"Don't press your luck, Markol. Because of you, we've naught to show for this escapade. If you weren't so damned secretive, if you'd confided your entire plan to me, I could have arranged a diversion. The least you should have done when it turned sour was avoid implicating me."

"You're not exactly open-mouthed, yourself."

"I keep to myself things that are none of your business. I don't withhold information I think you need." She stretched her arms and yawned. "Let's not waste energy arguing, Markol. I'm tired, and I'm not in the mood for sex. Leave it at that."

Markol nodded. In the three weeks that he'd known Wilda, he'd learned that unlike some women she meant what she said ... and a man could get his belly slit trying to prove otherwise. He knew, too, that Wilda's moods were worth the wait.

"What do we use for cover?" Markol asked, casting a glum eye over a sandy plain broken only by swollen dunes and flat, wind-eroded boulders. "We didn't have time to pack a tent. Just our cloaks, a few clothes, and some dried meat. I've heard the naked sun can fry a man's brains in these parts."

"Exaggeration, though not by much." Wilda scooped up sand in both hands, let it trickle between her fingers. "Here's our shade. Dig in. A meter or so is sufficient. Our cloaks can protect our faces."

"My clothes will get full of sand!"

"Aren't they already?"

Markol picked at grit wedged under the waistband of his breeches. "Aye. I'd still rather sleep on forest loam."

Wilda burrowed with her entire body, using her feet like a swimmer, to lie flat at an angle. "Look at it this way, Markol: we don't have to worry about predators. They don't hang around where there's no prey, and this land isn't called the Dead Kingdom for nothing."

He grimaced. "Only the human predators, brigands who would slay their mothers for a scrap of cloth."

"Speak for yourself." Covered to her armpits, Wilda drew her rapier from its scabbard, strapped to the pack, and thrust the hilt deep enough into the sand to stand the weapon upright. A small bit of meat blunted its tip. Using the sword as a tent-pole, she arranged the heavy cloak over her exposed face and arms. "Markol," she continued, "there are parts of the Dead

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Kingdom where even the boldest bandits will not go ... areas where pre-Chaos forces are rumored to survive."

"I'll take first watch ... Wilda! You haven't led us into such a region, have you?" He paled.

"Silly boy," she replied, vanishing beneath the cloak's folds. "I didn't know you were superstitious. Get some sleep."

Markol rubbed his chin, muttering, "Sure, you never withhold important information." The comment went unanswered. After a while he arranged his own shelter and tried to sleep.

The desert was very still.

Wilda squirmed and peered from under her cloak. Not yet noon. She frowned. Normally she slept well, though not deeply. She shouldn't have waked so soon ... unless there was danger.

The only sounds were the gentle rustle of sand passing over sand, impelled by a hot, gentle breeze, and of course Markol's bass breathing a few meters away.

Or was he that far? She felt a familiar prodding.

"I thought you had more sense, Markol," she whispered. The rapier was employed, but Wilda's dagger was sheathed at her belt. Her right arm snaked down along her side. With an effort, she checked her outrage. Certain types, unused to desert heat, often acted a little stupid. A nick from her knife should be reminder enough for her fellow thief. If it wasn't ... well, she was fond of Markol only to a point. Better to carry on alone than burden herself with a badly injured man in this wasteland.

Her fingers closed on the dagger hilt, but she relaxed them almost immediately. Her grit-filled breeches were still in place, yet the sensation was strong against her flesh. She swallowed a moan, raised the cloak with her left hand to see where Markol lay.

The man-sized hump of sand could be a ruse, but such elaboration was not Markol's style. She studied the edge of his cloak. It bulged in rhythm with his breathing. His head, at least, was where it should be.

She curled her upper lip. With a reach like that, Markol wouldn't have had to steal for a living.

She sucked in a sharp breath.

Wriggling beneath the layer of sand, Wilda sought a more comfortable position, finally settling on her back, head supported by clasped hands. She moved against the weight of the sand, and it seemed to push back gently. A drop of perspiration traced the line of her cheek scar.

During her sojourn in Numali, some years back, there was a fad regarding spontaneous orgasm. Visitations from B'or, the fertility god, the pious called them. Wilda had only witnessed one, and that was obviously a case of subconscious masturbation. The true miracles always happened to the relative of a relative. Wilda did not

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accept hearsay as fact. Strange things did happen, but Wilda credited only events she personally beheld or experienced.

Now she revised her opinion of Numali credulity.

Her breathing became short gasps. Her back arched, crushing her breasts against the covering sand. With eyes closed, Wilda let her body have its will until, with a violent shudder accompanied by low, choked cries, she reached her peak and subsided.

Wilda awoke, stiff in back and upper legs. She brushed her cloak aside and stared at the first stars of evening. Her throat was dry. She'd meant to rise before sunset.

A skittering claimed her attention. Markol had already dug out of his hole. He reached into his pack for a strip of dried meat.

Gasping at a sudden muscle spasm, Wilda twisted onto her stomach and crawled from her burrow.

Every movement seemed to rub raw a different patch of skin. Sandy grit had, naturally, seeped into boots, tunic, and breeches, though she had not thought so much of it could work down to her flesh. She kicked off her boots, tossed her head to loosen grains in her short-cropped hair, dug a forefinger under her belted waistband to dislodge a layer of granules.

"B'or's balls!" she muttered. "This could take all night." She hurriedly stripped to the skin, turning her clothes inside out for a thorough shaking and brushing off the grains that clung to her body.

Markol sipped water, watching her without expression.

"Never seen a naked woman before?" she snapped. Her free hand moved to cover neither breast nor genitals, but the wide scar on her abdomen, the last outward sign of a wound that had insured she'd bear no more children.

Markol grimaced. "You wouldn't have that problem if you kept your hands out of your pants."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Wilda turned from him to squat on her pack and look down. Threads of blood, black in the starlight, stained her inner thighs. The vagina was swollen and tender to the touch. She moistened a corner of her cloak from the waterskin and gingerly dabbed between her legs. More sand was matted in her pubic bush than in the hair on her head.

"Not in the mood, eh?" Markol jibed. "You were in the mood, all right, and a rare ripe one, too. You just wanted to punish me for fouling up the theft. All right, I'm punished. I'm also disappointed. I thought you were beyond childish manipulation, Wilda."

"What are you babbling about?" she asked, without looking up.

"I'm not deaf, and I'm too familiar with the sound of your passion-throes to mistake it for a desert creature. Not

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that there's a living thing within a kilometer of us."

Wilda straightened. "Oh. That. It was the strangest thing, Markol...."

"Not so strange. If you're sore, you've only yourself to blame."

She dropped the cloak, turned to stand and face him. "You think that I...?"

"It sure wasn't me, and I don't see anyone else around."

"You son of...." She paused for a deep breath. What else could he think? "Markol, you should know by now that I don't play games. I really wasn't in the mood, except, perhaps, subconsciously. What happened, happened without any help from me."

Markol grunted, removing his boots to empty them of sand. Wilda covered the short distance to his side and gripped his forearm.

"We can't afford doubt between us, Markol. Lay with me. Now."

Markol pulled away. "Sorry. *I'm* not in the mood."

Her foot caught him behind the knee while she pushed at his shoulders. Markol tumbled backwards onto his outstretched cloak. In a moment Wilda had a knee on his chest and was fumbling at his breeches.

"By the Great Sheath, you'll believe me if I have to rape you!"

Markol's surprise melted into mirth. His stomach shook with laughter under her. "You can't rape a willing soul," he said, lifting his hips to let her slide his breeches down.

"Ouch, damn it! Take it easy. It's delicate down there tonight."

"When did you ever like it easy?"

Wilda did something to make him wince. "I'm serious."

"If it hurts, we don't...."

"No. Just lay back and let me set the pace."

Afterwards she lay beside him, fingers stroking stubble on his jaw. "Markol?"

"Um."

"Do you feel ... something?"

He raised a hopeful eyebrow. "Again?"

"Not that. Something cold."

He shifted to draw the cloak over their nude forms. "This is a land of extremes. You told me that."

"That must be it. My imagination's been acting up lately." She tugged at his ear. "You must be a bad influence on me."

"I'm trying to be." He reached for a breast. She placed a hand over his.

"It's too sore now, Markol. Oh, don't pout. You don't have to go without." She pressed her face to his chest and slowly moved downward.

"Guess we'll spend today here, too." Markol watched the growing band of dawn.

"Another day in the Dead Kingdom," Wilda mused. "Maybe I shouldn't have been so anxious to prove something last night. I know you don't like it here." She stood and walked to her pile of shed clothing.

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Her steps were short, hesitant, a marked contrast to her normal brisk stride. Pain showed in her eyes and pale lips.

"I'm not complaining," Markol said uneasily. "Are you all right?"

"I will be." She sat on her cloak, pulled on her tunic, and took a deep swallow from her waterskin. Then she tossed the skin to the man. "Trade you."

Markol caught it one-handed. "Do I look that stupid? This is nearly empty."

She grinned. "It was worth a try."

Markol fingered the skin thoughtfully. "How much longer need we walk through desert?"

"If the maps were accurate, and I recall them rightly...." She pointed south. "Two nights' march to the plains. Call it three to be safe."

Markol nodded. "We've food for a week, if we're careful, but water is something else. Is there a safe hole on the way?"

She shrugged. "No idea. I'm sure we have enough water, Markol."

"Maybe, but we'd both feel better with a surplus." He began dressing. "I'd better backtrack and refill these skins. It'll only take a couple of hours."

"I'll come along." She rose unsteadily.

"No offense, Wilda, but in your present condition it would take us most of the day to reach the hole. I'll be careful."

Wilda sighed, sat down again. "Leave your skin, then."

"Why?"

"It's three quarters full; you won't add much to it. And I'll need it in case you're delayed. I don't want you moving through the hottest part of the day. If you can't make it, dig in somewhere until evening. I'm not prepared to treat sunstroke."

He laid his waterskin at her feet. "I'll be back before then."

She studied him coolly. "You don't have to do this, you know. We have enough water."

"I'd better start now, if I'm to get back." He rested a thick hand on her shoulder a moment longer than necessary, then turned to start his trek.

Wilda wriggled halfway into her hole at mid morning, but the grit trickling under her clothes irritated her more than usual. She decided instead to sit on her pack, cloak protecting her from the sun, and watch for Markol's return until the heat became too great. She shouldn't have let him go, though it was obvious he'd wanted to get away from this spot for a time. It was easy to get lost in the Dead Kingdom, especially for one as inexperienced with it as Markol. She'd given him her best advice, but words were not deeds. Sitting, she created a better landmark.

She rubbed eyes that were weary from reflected glare, and when she reopened them, there he was, atop a rocky dune. He paused to wave. She waved back. He came onward slowly,

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remembering her admonitions to avoid speed in hot regions.

Neither of them noticed a faint stirring of sand several meters to Markol's left until eerie keening throbbed in the quiet atmosphere.

Faster than the human eye could follow, a tower of whirling sand sprang up, thrice the man's height. Freak localized winds were not uncommon, but never had Wilda heard of one coming into existence so suddenly. Markol turned to see the storm moving toward him. He raised one arm to protect his eyes and plunged down the side of the dune.

"Lie flat!" Wilda screamed. "There's not enough sand to bury you! Lie flat until it passes!"

Markol showed no sign of hearing her. She would have been surprised if he did, over that fierce roar. The rush of wind had almost a malignant quality. Markol slipped and tumbled, rolling a few meters and scrambling to his feet at the bottom of the dune. He zigzagged over patches of exposed rock that provided solid footing.

Incredibly, the twisting tower of dust followed every turn.

Then there was only the storm, with Markol invisible in its center. The keening of the wind reached a cataclysmic pitch.

Yet it was not loud enough to obscure Markol's death scream.

The storm drifted to the right. Markol stood erect, shreds of bloody flesh still clinging where the bone had not been blasted clean. As Wilda watched, the corpse sank to its knees and folded like a screen into an indistinguishable crimson heap.

Wilda choked back vomit. She'd seen death often enough, though never like this. Later she could afford such release. Now, the storm was moving again, in a straight line, towards herself. Her prime concern was survival.

Fleeing was patently useless. The storm moved like a living thing. Wilda huddled into a tight ball, drawing the cloak close about her, to present the smallest possible target. The chance that it would pass by grew more remote each second, as the awful wind swelled louder, but it was the only chance she could see.

The storm was almost upon her when the wind died out.

Wilda licked her lips, spat the grit from her tongue. Her eyes were so tightly shut, they watered. She opened them, wiping at the moisture with the back of her hand. With nerveless fingers, she lifted her cloak a centimeter from the ground.

A slim pile of sand rose from the desert floor a hand's breadth from her inadequate shelter. Waiting.

Wilda stared at the mound, fascinated. She realized with a start that the grains were not swirling, not moving at all. She could only see the base and had no idea how high it rose. Perhaps this was merely a surface ripple she hadn't noticed earlier or one created by

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by the storm's passage.

She did not really believe so.

To await the storm's next move seemed the best course, but patience was not Wilda's strong point. Her right hand slid over the scabbard tied to her pack until she gripped the rapier's hilt. In a single smooth motion she drew the blade, flung the cloak aside, and rose to her feet.

She faced the semblance of a man; semblance, for it looked more like a sculptor's preliminary blocking of a statue in unlikely sandstone. Arms, legs, fingers, genitals were apparent from the form, but the face was a blank, devoid even of eyes or hair.

It moved.

Wilda raised her sword. The figure casually impaled itself as it approached. She felt little resistance as sand slid around the blade. A stubby hand stroked her unscarred cheek. Wilda brushed at it in annoyance. It drifted lower. Grains of sand seeped under her tunic, tickled her nipples, circled the abdominal scar, trickled lower.

The indelicate touch shattered the wonder that held her unmoving. Wilda leapt backwards, drawing free her sword.

"You raped me!"

The thing leaned on one leg, tilting its head at a rakish angle.

"Smug bastard, aren't you?" Wilda went on. "I suppose you call it seduction."

The faceless mask nodded proudly.

"Foul, degraded monster!" she spat, cheeks flushing with anger. The sand figure lost some of its composure, but that only encouraged her invective. "Thank B'or I insisted with Markol last night. At least I don't feel as filthy as...."

Rage dissolved into horror as Wilda read the thing's changing attitude. "Dear Dena! Is that why you slew him?"

The thing crossed its arms. Wilda's nausea returned. She did not fight it, turning away to sink to her knees and vomit.

At a touch on her buttock she spun about, upright again, glaring hatred. "Don't touch me," she hissed. "Markol had his faults, but he didn't deserve ... what you did. You ... you're not even human! How could you dare...!"

Grains whirled in tight little circles on the thing's torso, fuzzying its outline. Wilda had struck a nerve.

"What are you, spawn of Chaos? Show your true form! It can't be more reprehensible than your present mockery of a man!"

The whirling subsided. The man-shape remained.

"I thought as much. You have no form. You're a disembodied force; there's no substance to you at all." She lowered her useless weapon. "I doubt you're even capable of enjoying the liberties you took. Well, I'll be damned if I'm going to stand here talking to a walking sand castle."

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Wilda lifted her pack to strap it on.

A jet of sand shot from the being's chest with force enough to tear the pack from her grip and raise a red welt on her neck. Wilda lashed out automatically. Her weapon raked a line where ribs would be, a line that filled with sand almost at once. Another stream of dust smashed at her, scraping her right hand raw as it tugged the blade away.

Wilda blew at her hand, glaring at the sand-shifter. After a moment, she recovered the sword. This had been an object lesson; the creature had nothing to fear from any weapon at Wilda's command.

A few more false starts told her it would not let her leave.

Wilda perched gloomily on her pack, pondering her unnatural opponent; ignoring the noonday sun. Better to let perspiration streak her clothing and her skin bake scarlet than burrow into the sand for relief. The sand-shifter might take such an action as an invitation. Even if she wanted it, she doubted her tissues could take much more of the shifter's brand of lovemaking. At least it had made no move toward her, hostile or amorous, since she'd given up trying to leave. Why keep her prisoner, when it so readily cut poor Markol to ribbons?

Several hours passed before Wilda would admit the answer that crept from the back of her mind. Many things motivated Wilda, but one human emotion she'd all but obliterated in herself. She sought companionship for pleasure, for mutual aid, for protection when necessary, but never — she told herself — for its own sake.

The sand-shifter was lonely.

She could almost feel sorry for it. Few travelers entered the Dead Kingdom; there were other routes, longer but safer. Fewer still passed through those preternatural areas where the last remnants of Chaos and pre-Chaos were said to still hold sway. Almost none survived to boast of it. The sand-shifter, undoubtedly the only one of its kind and probably created solely for the amusement of the Old Gods, had no resources for diverting itself. Possibly it was confined to a limited territory. It yearned for companionship of any kind more sharply than Wilda ever did.

Except.

One loss was so painful to the woman that she kept it buried in the back of her mind in order to function. The memory came forth only when there seemed a hope of rectifying the wrong or, more often, when another's anguish reminded her. Wilda swallowed to clear her throat. If the being could empathize with her own emptiness, it would have to let her go.

"Sand-shifter!"

The thing approached.

"I cannot stay here."

The creature began to swell.

"No, hear me out. I have little love for the world. There are worse ways to end my days than keeping you com-

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pany." She took a deep breath. Truth did not come as easily as lies. "I ... have a daughter. The Royal Court at Pellnoran took her from me, called me unfit to mother. By the time I was released from prison, they'd sent her away. They wouldn't say where. I travel in search of her, or the means to recover her. I *must* find her. Do you understand? I cannot remain while she lacks knowledge of her mother."

Wilda was shaking as she finished. The loss was not a subject for casual speech, and she rarely spoke of it. She even felt ashamed at using the tragedy to elude the shifter, but she was no less sincere for that.

The figure swirled before her, condensed its granules, solidified into a new though not radically different shape. Again, a sculpture's first stages ... but this time the statue was that of a little girl.

It put its arms about the woman's waist, pressing its head to her stomach. Wilda circled the shoulders with one arm. With a glad cry, she hugged the sand-child to her, oblivious of grains that slipped between her fingers.

Eight years had passed since her daughter was taken. Wilda sometimes despaired of seeing her again. Here, now, was another lost being, a child no one could take from her, that would never leave her. Could *she* abandon *it*? The sandy feel of its slender arms should, in decency, repulse her.

Illusion, Wilda told herself, replying, what isn't?

Emotion knotted her throat. She released the sand-shifter to sip from her waterskin. There were few mouthfuls left.

She stood, patting the sand-child's hand. "I'll have to fill this."

The shifter clung warily to her arm. Wilda took two steps. The pressure of its grip became a vise. She glanced wide-eyed down at the thing, then looked to where Markol's ruined corpse lay. Her skin prickled.

This was no child, nor ever could be.

"I must have water!" She took another step toward the dune. The shifter pulled. Wilda sprawled on her back on the hot sands.

So the creature *was* tied to this piece of land, as she'd suspected. Its influence extended no further than the dune where it had first appeared. It would not let Wilda out of its range, no matter what she promised. In reversed circumstances, Wilda had to admit, neither would she.

"It doesn't have to be from that water hole," she said evenly, hoping the shifter did not yet realize their rapport had shattered. "Maybe you know of a nearer source? An underground stream?"

The sand-shifter did not move. Her question was answered.

"I can't keep you company if I die of thirst!"

The shifter shrugged. Wilda would not die immediately. It would settle for a few days of grudging companionship.

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Wilda reversed her rapier, placing its point under her heart. The position was awkward, but not impossible.

"Better a quick death, then. If I do not get water, I will kill myself, and you'll be no better off."

The sand at her feet erupted, blinding her. Once more the weapon was torn from her grasp. She sank to her knees, choking and spitting. When the dust cleared, the sword had been buried. Somewhere. Snarling, Wilda reached for her dagger. Sheath and all had been ripped from her belt. The shifter was thorough.

She trembled with anger, more at herself than at the creature's actions, which were only to be expected. She *could* have slain herself despite the thing's efforts, if she'd been fast enough. However, Wilda did not want to die. While one lived, there were options.

Damned few options at present, she admitted.

The sun was low in the sky. Wilda drained her waterskin dry and tucked it into her belt. The sand-child came to where she sat on her pack and laid its head in her lap. Wilda absently patted its head; then, revolted, thrust the shifter away. Or tried to. Her hands sank into the form.

"Let me die in peace!"

The sand-child collapsed, forming a heap that encased her legs. Wilda impatiently brushed the grains from her breeches.

They rolled back.

More grains joined them.

Wilda now sat in a pile of sand as high as her waist, and growing taller. The sand-shifter was burying her.

"Decided to do me in yourself, eh?" she said, batting at the creeping grit. "A little too boring for you? Well, I don't go that easily."

Clouds of dust enveloped her torso, and Wilda realized with a shock that the air around her head was fairly clean. The thing was not trying to smother her, only keep her from moving.

The red orb in the west touched the horizon line.

"You need the sun to function! That's why you didn't manifest yourself last night!"

The swirling grew more animated. Wilda scraped frantically, trying to dig free or at least keep pace with the shifter's work.

The shifter was faster.

A heavy weight pinned her left arm. Her eyes widened as wriggling fingers disappeared into the mound. Wilda swung her right arm overhead, no longer concerned with digging. This limb was the only part of her body still free. Only violent motion could keep it from being trapped.

A loop of sand circled the wrist, dragged it down. Wilda found the strength to tear free. Something pulled at her ankles, sucking her downward. Her breathing grew ragged at this fresh terror. It was one thing to be buried in

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a mound atop the ground and another to sink below the desert floor....

A thicker loop of sand encircled wrist and forearm.

The sun's last rays silhouetted a low mound topped by a woman's head and a wildly flapping arm. Sand rose in a wave to engulf that arm. Smaller grains moved to pack firmly about the torso, even to the jawline. Wilda was clamped in place so that she could not even look up at the first stars of evening. From the neck down, her muscles were immovable.

Almost.

When it became obvious the sand-shifter would win, Wilda allowed it to imprison her one free limb. At the same time, she formed a fist about her thumb. As the shifter's power ebbed, the sands regained their normal, independent structure. Wilda could move her thumb but a fraction of a centimeter, but that was more than she could move anything else. Waggling the digit back and forth, Wilda gradually enlarged its room for play.

A tedious hour passed. Her hand muscles felt cramped. Maybe the task was impossible. Maybe, if she waited for tomorrow night, the shifter would get careless and provide a better opportunity.

No. She had to free herself by the coming dawn. A day in the desert without water would leave her too weak to try this a second time.

She felt her index finger move half a centimeter, and redoubled her efforts.

Shortly after midnight, her right forefinger wriggled in the cool night air.

The last stars faded. Wilda kicked and cursed and pulled her left leg free. The right was still trapped from the knee down. She yanked. That seemed like a good way to sprain her ankle. Torn fingernails and bleeding hands continued to dig.

Sand clung to blood-streaked arms as she worked, hardly daring to glance to the east, where the sky grew lighter. Five minutes, that was all she asked, maybe four. Ample time to dig out, but that wasn't enough. She had to reach the dune and beyond. That was the one sure limit of the shifter's range. Another direction might lead to safety in a dozen meters ... or a dozen kilometers.. She couldn't take that chance.

Her calf was now exposed. She wriggled the foot.

Something gripped her ankle.

Wilda bellowed and threw herself backwards out of the pit, tearing free. She gained her feet, peered over the lip. In the twilight, she could just make out the strap of the pack she'd been sitting on.

Sighing in relief, she reached down to attempt to pull it loose. Supplies would be hard to come by.

Grit fumbled at her fingers.

She'd been expecting that touch for the past half hour and pulled away at once. The shifter closed on a blood-slick digit, which slipped from its

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grasp. So much for supplies. She snatched the cloak she'd been wearing when the shifter buried her, rolled it into a ball before her to avoid tripping over it ... and ran.

A tower of sand swirled from the pit. With it came that awful, dismal, horrible, shrieking wind.

Lie flat, she'd tried to tell Markol. Sound advice in an ordinary sandstorm, but it would seal her doom now. Better to be flayed to the bone in a bid to escape.

Wilda did not look to see how close it was. She already knew: too close. She ran in a straight line. Markol's tactics hadn't helped him. Rocks were fine for solid footing, when they happened to be on the way. Otherwise she slogged ankle-deep in sand, ignoring the grit in her boots, aware only of the fact that she advanced too slow, too slow.

She was frankly amazed to find herself at the foot of the dune and still alive, though that wind was at her back. She climbed, stumbling, scrabbling on knees and elbows rather than waste time regaining her footing. Grains swirled before her face, a few at first and then more, stinging her cheeks. She shut her eyes, creeping blindly forward. Just a couple of meters to the top....

She cried out as her tunic was torn from her back in thick chunks, exposing skin to a merciless searing. Honest folk — or those who'd never been caught — piously believed that a criminal could not remember the agony of a well-done flogging. Wilda recalled it perfectly. This was far worse. It did not cease.

Then she was rolling, rolling, tumbling end over end. She'd slipped. She sobbed in exasperation. So close, and then to fall back into the sand-shifter's power..!

It was toying with her, she thought resentfully as she lay, unseeing, where she'd stopped. The wind's fearsome moan was a little distant, as though, sure of its prey, the creature had backed off.

Wilda rubbed her eyes clear to face death.

The dune was behind her! She'd done it! Reached the top and rolled to the bottom on the other side. The shifter howled its despair at the crest of the dune. It could come no further. It was bound to a small stretch of land in the Dead Kingdom.

Wilda stuck her tongue out at the shifter and deliberately turned away. Any scraps of pity she had felt for the thing had been destroyed by its readiness to trade on her misfortune ... not to mention her death. She had hurts of her own to tend to.

She touched her back. The hand came away covered with fresh thick blood. She'd have a fiendish time cleaning those wounds, but they did not by themselves seem fatal. A few threads held the tunic's front in place. She snapped them and tore the cloth lengthwise into makeshift bandages. The cloak was needed intact to protect

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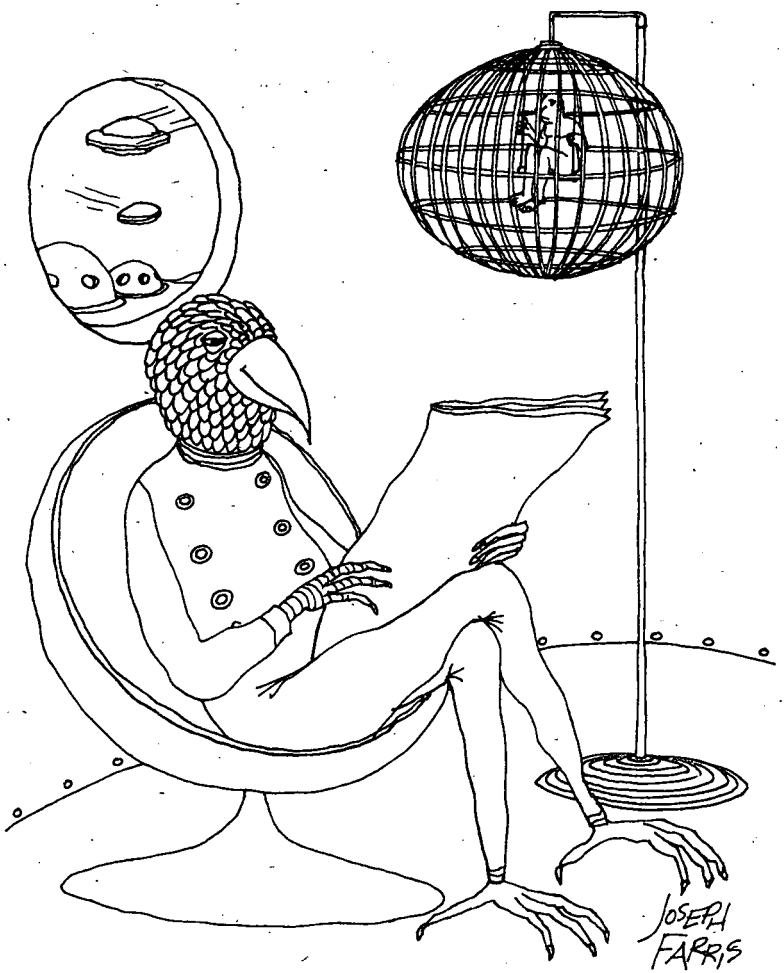
her raw flesh from the sun. Thank B'or there was little likelihood of infection in this lifeless land.

She examined her situation critically. Weaponless; no food; no water; hurt and bleeding; fatigued by emotions and lack of sleep.

She grinned. It wasn't as though she were *really* handicapped.



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This new Jane Yolen story will be included in a forthcoming collection of "poems and tales of undersea" titled NEPTUNE RISING (Philomel).

Sun/Flight

BY
JANE YOLEN

They call me the nameless one. My mother was the sea, and the sun itself fathered me. I was born fully clothed and on my boyish cheeks the beginnings of a beard. Whoever I was, wherever I came from, had been washed from me by the waves in which I was found.

And so I have made many pasts for myself. A honey-colored mother cradling me. A father with his beard short and shaped like a Minoan spade. Sisters and brothers have I gifted myself. And a home that smelled of fresh-strewn reeds and olives ripening on the trees. Sometimes I make myself a king's son, godborn, a javelin in my hand and a smear of honeycake on my lips. Other times I am a craftsman's child, with a length of golden string threaded around my thumbs. Or the son of a *dmos*, a serf, my back arched over the furrows where little birds search for seeds like farmers counting the crop. With no remembered pasts, I can pick a different one each day to suit my mood, to cater my need.

But most of the time I think myself the child of the birds, for when the fishermen pulled me up from the sea, drowned of my past, I clutched a single feather in my hand. The feather was golden, sun-colored, and when it dried it was tufted with yellow rays. I carried it with me always, my talisman, my token back across the Styx. No one knew what bird had carried this feather in its wing or tail. The shaft is strong and white and the barbs soft. The little fingers of down are no-color at all; they change with the changing light.

So I am no-name, son of no-bird, pulled from the waters of the sea north and east of Delos, too far for swimming, my only sail the feather in my hand.

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The head of the fishermen who rescued me was a morose man called Talos who would have spoken more had he no tongue at all. But he was a good man, for all that he was silent. He gave me advice but once, and had I listened then, I would not be here, now, in a cold and dark cavern listening to voices from my unremembered past and fearing the rising of the sun.

When Talos plucked me from the water, he wrung me out with hands that were horned from work. He made no comment at all about my own hands, whose softness the water-wrinkles could not disguise. He brought me home to his childless wife. She spread honey-balm on my burns, for my back and right side were seared as if I had been drawn from the flames instead of from the sea. The puckered scars along my side are still testimony to that fire. Talos was convinced I had come from the wreckage of a burning ship, though no sails or spars were ever found. But the only fire I could recall was red and round as the sun.

Of fire and water was I made, Talos' wife said. Her tongue ran before her thoughts always. She spoke twice, once for herself and once for her speechless husband. "Of sun and sea, my only child," she would say, fondly stroking my wine-dark hair, touching the feather I kept pinned to my *chiton*. "Bird child. A gift of the sky, a gift from the sea."

So I stayed with them. Indeed, where else could I, still a boy, go? And they were content. Except for the scar seaming my side, I was thought handsome. And my fingers were clever with memories of their own. They could make things of which I had no conscious knowledge: miniature buildings of strange design, with passages that turned back upon themselves; a mechanical bull-man that could move about and roar when wound with a hand-carved key.

"Fingers from the gods," Talos' wife said. "Such fingers. You're father must have been Hephaestus, though you have Apollo's face." And she added god after god to my siring, a litany that comforted her until Talos' warning grunt stemmed the rising tide of her words.

At last my good looks and my clever fingers brought me to the attention of the local lord, I the nameless one, the child of sun and sea and sky. That lord was called Circinus. He had many slaves and many bondsmen, but only one daughter, Perdix.

She was an ox-eyed beauty, with a long neck. Her slim, boyish body, her straight, narrow nose, reminded me somehow of my time before the waves, though I could not quite say how. Her name was sighed from every man's lips, but no one dared speak it aloud.

Lord Circinus asked for my services and, reluctantly, Talos and his wife let me go. He merely nodded a slow acceptance. She wept all over my shoulder before I left, a second drowning. But I, eager to show the Lord Circinus

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my skills, paid them scant attention.

It was then that Talos unlocked his few words for me.

"Do not fly too high, my son," he said. And like his wife, repeated himself. "Do not fly too high."

He meant Perdix, of course, for he had seen my eyes on her. But I was just newly conscious of my body's desires. I could not, did not listen.

That was how I came into Lord Circinus' household, bringing nothing but the clothes I wore, the feather of my past, and the strange talent that lived in my hands. In Lord Circinus' house I was given a sleeping room and a workroom and leave to set the pattern of my days.

Work was my joy and my excuse. I began simply, making clay-headed dolls, with wooden trunks and jointed limbs, testing out the tools that Circinus gave me. But soon I moved away from such childish things and constructed a dancing floor of such intricately mazed panels of wood, I was rewarded with a pocket of gold.

I never looked boldly upon the Lady Perdix. It was not my place. But I glanced longways, from the corners of my eyes. And somehow she must have known. For it was not long before she found my workroom and came to tease me with her boy's body and quick tongue. Like my stepfather Talos, I had no magic in my answers, only in my fingers, and Perdix always laughed at me twice: once for my slow speech and once for the quick flush that quickly burned my cheeks after each exchange.

I recall the first time she came upon me as I worked on a mechanical bird that could fly in short bursts towards the sun. She entered the workroom and stood by my side watching for a while. Then she put her right hand over mine. I could feel the heat from her hand burn me, all the way up my arm, though this burning left no visible scar.

"My Lady," I said. So I had been instructed to address her. She was a year younger than I. "It is said that a woman should wait upon a man's moves."

"If that were so," she answered swiftly, "all women would be called Penelope. But I would have woven a different ending to *that* particular tale." She laughed. "Too much waiting without an eye upon her, makes a maid mad."

Her wordy cleverness confounded me and I blushed. But she lifted her hand from mine and, still laughing, left the room.

It was a week before she returned. I did not even hear her enter, but when I turned around she was sitting on the floor with her skirts rolled halfway up her thighs. Her tanned legs flashed unmistakable signals at me that I dared not answer.

"Do you think it better to wait for a god or wait upon a man?" she asked, as

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if a week had not come between her last words and these.

I mumbled something about a man having but one form and a god many, and concluded lamely that perhaps, then, waiting for a god would be more interesting.

"Oh, yes," she said, "many girls have waited for a god to come. But not I. Men can be made gods, you know."

I did not know, and confessed it.

"My cousin Danae," she said, "said that great Zeus had come into her lap in a shower of gold. But I suspect it was a more mundane lover. After all, it has happened many times before that a man has showered gold into a girl's skirts and she opens her legs to him. That does not make *him* a god, or his coming gold." She laughed that familiar low laugh and added under her breath, "Cousin Danae always did have a quick answer for her mistakes."

"Like you, my Lady?" I asked.

She answered me with a smile and stood up slowly. As I watched, she walked towards me, stopping only inches away. I could scarcely breathe. She took the feather off the workbench where it lay among my tools and ran it down my chest. I was dressed only in a linen loincloth, my *chiton* set aside, for it was summer and very very hot.

I must have sighed. I know I bit my lip. And then she dropped the feather and it fluttered slowly to the floor. She used her fingers in the feather's place, and they were infinitely more knowing than my own. They found the pattern of my scar and traced it slowly as a blind child traces the raised fable on a vase.

I stepped through the last bit of space between us and put my arms around her as if I were fitting the last piece of my puzzle into a maze. For a moment we stood as still as any frieze; then she pushed me backwards and I tumbled down. But I held on to her, and she fell on top of me, fitting her mouth to mine.

Perdix came to my room that night, and the next I went to hers. And she made me a god. And so it continued night after night, a pattern as complicated as any I could devise, and as simple, too. I could not conceive of it ending.

But end it did.

One night she did not tap lightly at my door and slip in, a shadow in a night of shadows. I thought perhaps her moon time had come, until the next morning in the hallway near my workroom when I saw her whisper into the ear of a new slave. He had skin almost as dark as the wings of the bittern, and wild black hair. His nostrils flared like a beast's. Perdix placed her hand on his shoulder and turned him to face me. When I flushed with anger and with pain, they both laughed, he taking his cue from her, a scant beat behind.

Night could not come fast enough to hide my shame. I lay on my couch and thought I slept. A dream voice from the labyrinth that is my past

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cried out to me, in dark and brutish tones. I rose, not knowing I rose, and took my carving knife in hand. Wrapped only in night's cloak, the feather stuck in my hair, I crept down the corridors of the house.

I sniffed the still air. I listened for every sound. And then I heard it truly, the monster from my dream, agonizing over its meal. It screamed and moaned and panted and wept, but the tears that fell from its bullish head were as red as human blood.

I saw it, I tell you, in her room crouched over her, devouring my lady, my lost Perdix. My knife was ready, and I fell upon its back, black Minotaur of my devising. But it slid from the bed and melted away in the darkness, and my blade found her waiting heart instead.

She made no sound above a sigh.

My clever fingers, so nimble, so fast, could not hold the wound together, could not seam it closed. She seemed to be leaking away through my clumsy hands.

Then I heard a rush of wings, as if her soul had flown from the room. And I knew I had to fly after her and fetch her back before she left this world forever. So I took the feather from my hair and, dipping it into the red ocean of her life, printed great bloody wings, feathered tracings, along my shoulders and down my arms. And I flew high, high after her and fell into the bright searing light of dawn.

* * *

When they found me in the morning, by her bedside, crouched naked by her corpse, scarred with her blood, they took me, all unprotesting, to Lord Circinus. He had me thrown into this dark cave.

Tomorrow, before the sun comes again, I will be brought from this place and tied to a post sunk in the sand.

Oh, the cleverness of it, the cleverness. It might have been devised by my own little darling, my Perdix, for her father never had her wit. The post is at a place beyond the high water mark and I will be bound to it at the ebb. All morning my father, the sun, will burn me, and my father the rising tide will melt the red feathers of blood that decorate my chest and arms and side. And I will watch myself go back into the waters from which I was first pulled, nameless but alive.

Of fire and water I came, of fire and water I return. Talos was right. I flew too high. Truly there is no second fooling of the Fates.

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In which some off-trail research leads to a discovery that will imprint data directly into the memory cells, so that a slum dweller can be made into an engineer in under a year, and several men begin to think about the consequences....

EasyEd

BY
JOSEPH GREEN
and PATRICE MILTON

The overhead light was off, the long hallway with its sidewalls of mirror-tile illuminated only by a spillover of sunlight pouring through the open bathroom door. I had just emerged from Atom's room, caught my reflection, paused, and brought out my comb, when the shot sounded.

The soft lead bullet hit the tip of my nose, blasting away the flexible tissue and part of the septum. I saw my own face, framed in the foot-square area of a single tile, change expression. The eyes widened in unbelieving horror, each thick dark-brown eyebrow curving upward into an inverted V of shocked surprise. My nose was instantly transformed into a shapeless blob, one spraying a heavy mist of blood. The red drops hit the mirror just below the image of my lips, hiding the chestnut-bearded chin as though it had been an artist's mistake, a false start, to be painted over and begun again.

The first amazed awareness in my stunned brain was that I had not yet felt the pain. Instead, there was a numbing sense of impact, as though a huge fist had just grazed my prominent Roman beak, assaulting that inheritance from proud ancestors stretching in unbroken succession back to antebellum Georgia. But my ears hurt immediately. The sound of the shot was still roaring through the narrow hallway, reverberating like confined thunder seeking its freedom.

I knew that gun. It had to be the old Colt .45, the short-barrel, single-action revolver Fritz had inherited from his father. An antique, a valuable property, restored to usefulness and power because it was the only gun Fritz owned. He was no hunter; his hobbies were golf and tennis.

Fritz ... I started turning my head

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toward the dining room at the end of the hall, knowing I would see him there, aiming carefully for the second shot that would finish me. And then it would be down the hall and into Atom's room. At some point during the long and sleepless night Fritz had slipped over that fine line that delimits acceptable behavior for most of us. We were a terrifying threat to the entire social order, a sharp blade swinging at the slim thread that held his ordered, secure life suspended in time and space — and he could not bear to see it cut, and risk the terrible fall.

Fritz was going to kill me — and I was only the best friend of his real enemy, his brother-in-law, Atom.

Fritz Stubens had married Salya Rosenberg while both were still in college. Her younger brother Adam was twelve. Four years later Fritz had his M.A. in business administration and was clawing hard at the lowest rungs on the ladder of success. He started work as a salesman for Computer Education, a programmed learning computer soft-ware firm. The older Rosenbergs died together in an airplane crash that same year, while returning from a visit to Israel. And the moody, temperamental young genius now called Atom became the responsibility of his sister and brother-in-law.

It was a bad scene from the beginning. I met Atom when he moved in with his relatives and started the eleventh grade in Coral Gables High. Overly aggressive or defensive and vulnerable by turns, he could not adapt to the easy-going social life of a South Florida school. His obvious brilliance only made the situation worse. He was on a straight track for a Ph.D. in physics, his one consuming passion, and had little patience with unrelated subjects.

The orphaned Jew from New York and Jefferson Davis Blandings III, Scion of the South, became best friends, in easy, gingerly stepped stages. I was aiming for a career in experimental psychology, though my natural inclination was toward literature and creative writing. I would not have made it through high school, much less my required undergraduate work in physics and math, without Atom.

And Atom needed me. His interest in literature was nil, his ability to express himself in words poor. The only foreign language he could ever learn to speak with insight and understanding was that of mathematics — he couldn't even handle Yiddish. I had to teach Atom how to drive a car — it seemed strange to me that he had not even tried to learn — and helped him get his license, a necessity for any social life in Miami. Except in his areas of specialty, Atom was an all-around incompetent. I may have gotten more from him than I gave over the years, but I helped Atom where he needed it most.

By the time we finished at Miami U and left Florida for graduate schools, our friendship was six years old and secure. Atom went to MIT, where he es-

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tablished a mixed record; a jagged chart of nearly perfect scores in all the hard sciences, dismal grades in the easy courses that were supposed to produce a well-rounded human being. Without me there, he had to have special tutoring in several subjects. The insurance money from the death of the older Rosenbergs ran out while Atom was in graduate school, but Fritz was doing well in his career, and the Stubens carried Atom through his last year of full-time study.

We had kept in constant touch — me by letters, Atom usually by long phonecalls at the low night rate — and saw each other each time we were in Miami together. Atom got his Ph.D. a year ahead of me — I had to work part-time to supplement what my parents could squeeze out of their small business — and promptly landed an assistant's job back in Miami. He was not at our old alma mater but Florida International, the youngest of the state universities in the South Florida area. The job involved working with a noted scientist who had a government grant to do research on minute electrical currents. Since money was tight and his stipend small, he had moved back in with his sister and brother-in-law. By now the Stubens also had two kids of their own.

I returned home with my Ph.D. and better prospects for finding a job digging ditches than teaching psychology. I moved back in with my parents from simple lack of choice. But I was an only child, and there was always room for me.

I began trying to improve my curriculum vitae, puny though it was, while undergoing a bad case of existential despair. Atom called after I had been home a few days, offering pizzas and beer that night at a favorite old hangout. I eagerly accepted.

It was the first time I had seen Atom in the flesh for almost a year. He had grown a short, very black full beard, a match for my own reddish-brown chin-whiskers. His nose could have been a direct inheritance from Shylock, and the beard made it seem even larger. He seemed the same wire-thin, dark and intense person he had always been. But when he came down the restaurant aisle toward the table where I waited, I saw a sparkle in his dark-brown eyes that hadn't been there since I helped him lose his virginity at eighteen.

After the usual pleasantries I commented that the world must be treating him nicely, that he really looked great — and saw a slightly secretive, surprised look cloud his face.

"Didn't know it showed, Jeff. Sure, I'm a happy man. Finally doing something worthwhile; first time in my life, I think."

Atom looked around, as though afraid to go on. The good citizens of Miami were concentrating on their own business and the food. He relaxed, and the guarded expression faded. I saw him hesitate, then shrug, as though

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making up his mind on something important.

"Guess I can tell *you* about it, Jeff. I've gotten interested in physiology. Audited two undergraduate courses at MIT during my last year. Then I did some extra work on my own. Remember how I always wanted to be an astrophysicist? Understand the universe? Now I've gone the other way. Decided there was more need to study the very small than the very large. Professor Holdstein has been working for three years on a way to translate sound into electrical impulses identical to those transmitted to the auditory cortex by the cochlear nerve. That would make it possible to bypass a damaged ear; just implant a wire from an external receiver directly into contact with the cochlear."

I nodded. This was an old idea, one which had been intensively studied, without much success to date. Holdstein was one among a number of investigators working in this field.

Atom was watching me intently, as though uncertain he wanted to continue. I waited; in time he would tell me everything, without prompting.

"A year ago Holdstein received a grant from HHS on a proposal to help people whose ears are okay, but where the nerve itself is undeveloped. That's the most common form of congenital deafness; comes from rubella infection by the pregnant mother, genetic abnormality, other causes. The idea was to take what we had learned about stimulating the nerve impulse via wire and build a device to beam the same current directly through the skull into the auditory cortex, at one of the points where input is normally received from the cochlear. That would give us a complete external 'ear,' one that could restore hearing to anyone with an undamaged brain."

That was interesting, but hardly overwhelming. New discoveries in prosthesis applications were being made every year.

"Been working on the problem for a year now, almost by myself," Atom said, after swallowing a long drink of beer. "Wasn't all that difficult, once we knew how to duplicate the myoelectric signal from the cochlear. Finished over two months ago. Tried it on three deaf kids, two with rubella mothers, one a gene disorder. They heard, for the first time in their lives. They heard, Jeff! It's difficult to describe the feeling that gives you, to know you can enable deaf children to hear. One of the most rewarding experiences of my life. Better than sex."

Atom hardly knew what loving sex was, I'm afraid. A few times a year, when he had the money, Atom picked up the phone and sent for a call-girl. Otherwise he was notoriously unsuccessful with women. They all wanted more time and attention than Atom was prepared to give.

"Hey, that's great, and I'm delighted to hear it." I was thinking of a deaf cousin who was twenty-three now, a

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victim of the great rubella plague that had swept the nation in 1964-65, hitting South Florida particularly hard. She was over 90-percent deaf, solely from lack of cochlear nerve development.

Atom was staring at me with sudden intentness. I didn't like the slow smile that gradually tugged up the corners of his bearded mouth. "Just had a thought, Jeff. Physiology was a major undergraduate field for you, right? Want to take a quick postgraduate course? Guaranteed to be the equivalent of ten credit hours of postgrad independent study. It will take you about an hour."

I stared at him, jarred by the quick change of subject. Or was it a change? Somehow he seemed to have been leading up to this moment. But I would still have sworn it was also on a sudden impulse that he made me this peculiar offer.

"What are you talking about?"

"Finish your beer and let's go. It's time you saw for yourself."

More than a little puzzled, but unable to resist his intensity — just as in the old days — I drank up, and we left.

It was already past nine, but Atom had the key to the lab where he worked under Holdstein. He drove us there in Salya's car, a short stretch through the sprawling southwest Miami suburbs to the Palmetto Expressway, from it onto the Tamiami Trail heading west, and off that in a few minutes at the university grounds.

A short time later I was sitting in a peculiar apparatus that bore an unfortunate resemblance to "Ol' Sparky," the heavy wooden chair with the special electrical attachments at the end of Death Row up in Raiford Prison. Only my strong faith in Atom kept me seated there as he fiddled with the breadbox controls. I did protest when he placed the plastic and metal cap over my head, but he assured me it was perfectly safe. And before I could decide that I didn't trust even my best friend quite this much, he threw the master switch.

I realized I had been out only when I revived. It wasn't like waking up; more as if someone had turned my brain off and then back on again. I seemed perfectly normal, even slightly rested. But a glance at my watch showed over an hour had passed. Atom was bending over me, looking intently into my eyes.

"Feel okay?" he asked, voice casual. "Sometimes there's a little sense of disorientation."

"No, I'm fine." And I was, though there was an odd sense of *change* in my head, as though something had happened of which I was not yet aware.

"You need to sleep about eight hours, and when you wake up, a lot of it will have been assimilated," Atom said cheerfully. "In this case, one imprinting is worth many thousand

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words. You'll see what I mean in the morning."

"Maybe I will, but I want to know what you did to me *now*!"

Atom saw that I was more than a little perturbed and gave me a straightforward answer. "It's simple enough, Jeff. While running tests on deaf kids, I discovered you can use the cochlear nerve myoelectric signal to send data directly into the memory cells. Stepping up the power just a little above the human norm causes the new data to be so strongly absorbed it becomes permanent. Frequency modulation of the signal lets you feed it in a thousand times faster than spoken words are normally received. It's the ear that's slow, not the brain. You'll understand better tomorrow."

And Atom took me home to sleep off my fright and fear.

I awoke next morning thinking of a complex chemical reaction involving IgG and IgH antibodies, and how they mediate inflammatory processes while destroying invaders of the body — and realized at once I hadn't known beans about these subjects the day before.

I spent the rest of the day wandering around in a semi-daze, just letting the flood of new knowledge wash over me in a gentle but irresistible wave. That night I sat and watched an excellent TV program, a gripping drama of terror, strife, suffering, despair, and final triumph — and had forgotten it entirely before I went to bed. But next morning my head had cleared, and for the first time I was able to more or less systematically evaluate what I had learned in an hour under Atom's imprinting cap.

My friend hadn't been exaggerating. Except for needing some more experience physically handling laboratory equipment, I could have walked into any biological research facility and performed as a competent assistant experimenter. Me, the literary pretender who had never sold a word, the psychologist whose Ph.D. was still ink-wet and worthless — I knew one hell of a lot of high-level physiology.

And I was one frightened man.

The implications were stunning. If I could receive ten graduate credit hours this quickly and easily, what were they worth? What happened to physiology degree programs? How could I convince a staid academic administrator to hire me? And then I realized I was thinking small, not seeing the larger picture.... If physiology could be imprinted this way, why not physics? Medicine? Even politics and history?

I was looking at a complete revolution in formal education, the end of the classroom — and of the teaching profession of which I was trying very hard to become a member.

I wondered if Atom had considered the impact his discovery was going to have on the world. And what about the financial implications? Had he filed his patent application? My God! *Did he own the rights?* Atom was working for a senior researcher at a university,

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who was himself funded by a government grant. He probably held no more ownership in the results of his labors than I did.

But there was a way ... a wise old professor in my organic chemistry class had told us, candidly, that if we ever made a discovery of great commercial value under similar circumstances, to keep it to ourselves. How did we think most of the current swarm of small but rich biotechnology companies had gotten started?

This was getting way over my head. Atom needed more help than I could give him ... and the inspiration dawned, sharp and clear. Fritz Stubens! Atom's own brother-in-law was the obvious party to help us here. He was already in a closely related business. And, naturally, Atom would never have thought of consulting dull, dependable ol' Fritz.

Atom did not exactly feel contemptuous toward his brother-in-law. He simply had no appreciation at all for his good qualities. He loved Salya, but failed to see why she was making a life with Fritz. The brothers-in-law got along smoothly, but it was by keeping a noticeable distance from each other.

I went over to the Stubens' house that night. Atom and I retreated to his bedroom and had one of the longest and worst arguments ever — but in the end, I won. At ten thirty we called in Fritz and gave him the gist of Atom's breakthrough and what it could mean to computer-assisted education.

Fritz was a big, wide-shouldered man with a beginning paunch and the start of a bald spot at the crown of his pale blond hair. When I saw him with dark-eyed, petite, and lovely Salya, he inspired thoughts about a brown bear playing house with a Magyar princess. He was a strong-willed, humorless man who didn't mind hurting other people's feelings, which helped explain why he was already a vice-president in his small company. But he adored Salya and was a devoted and caring father to their two sons.

When we finished — me doing most of the talking — Fritz had one simple and straight-forward comment.

"I don't believe you."

"That figures," said Atom, making no effort to hide his disgust.

"No, the imprinter works, Fritz. I know, because it implanted a whole batch of new knowledge in my head just two nights ago. Look — Atom, what other subjects do you have on tape now? We need to prove it works on Fritz."

Atom looked surprised. "I've only made up two. It takes time, but the process isn't really difficult. Both those programs were converted from home-study courses designed for small home computers — made by Computer Education, in fact. But high-level programs require a prior background in the subject. There has to be a good base for assimilation, or it will all eventually fade."

That made sense. Anyone involved

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in education knew the human mind built on what it already knew. "Then how long will it take you to prepare a tape on some subject Fritz can use? Statistics, maybe?"

"Statistics? I could have a tape ready in a week," said Atom, looking at Fritz.

It was obvious Atom expected Fritz to refuse. But the businessman side of Fritz could see dollar signs floating through his cerebrum. If this actually did work, and he got his little company in on the ground floor ... it could be move over IBM!

It was late, and we were all tired. Fritz wanted to think it over. I went home and to bed.

It took Atom almost two weeks to prepare an advanced course on statistics. While waiting, Fritz backed out three times — but eventually we were walking into the lab one Saturday night, leaving a mystified Salya asking unanswered questions back home. While Fritz was under the cap, apparently simply dozing, Atom shared some recent thoughts with me.

"Preparing this program took time away from work I consider a lot more important, Jeff. I've started a new line of application. We have another input pathway that carries far more actual data per second than the cochlear — the photo-optic nerve. Using the same basic principle, we should be able to imprint visual images that will become just as fixed as the verbal. Some people can do this now, mentally photograph whole pages of text, then call them up to be read later. We should be able to make that possible for everyone. And then it will be an easy job to combine the two methods, giving you a complete package of stored images and the words that accompany them. Same thing you get out of a textbook now, except that you could absorb a thick one in an hour and gain permanent retention."

I was again getting slightly dizzy from the prospect. "So you could carry around an entire *Encyclopedia Britannica* inside your head. Words and pictures both. Available whenever you wanted them."

"Right, if you wanted to waste all that space. Or be the world's greatest generalist."

That brought on another distracting thought. "Just how much capacity do you think the human brain has, Atom?"

"Don't know yet. But it's limited. Funny; old Arthur Conan Doyle, speaking through his mouthpiece Holmes, made an intuitive leap to an unknown truth. Remember Sherlock always tried to forget anything learned that wasn't helpful to his specialty? He was convinced the brain had a limited capacity to store data, and junk taken in meant something good had to be forced out. I think he's going to be proved right. We'll still need specialists after EasyEd becomes universal. You

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can be an expert in any learned discipline you choose, but a thorough knowledge of any major field will use up all your available capacity."

"Easy Ed?" I asked, and he grinned and wrote it out for me. Atom had started thinking in terms of marketing.

Fritz came out from under the cap a little dazed, subdued but not hurt. Atom took him home to sleep it off, dropping me at my parents' home on the way.

On Monday morning Fritz Stubens knew a great deal more than he had before about statistics, knowledge that would be highly useful to him in his job — and Monday night we four conspirators to change the world held a conference in the Stubens' living room.

Salya had finally been brought up to date by Atom and Fritz. I had always liked Salya a little more than I should, but she was four years older, and when you are a teenager, four years really matters. I had managed to keep my lustful thoughts to myself, and my hands off her small but beautifully proportioned body. And I had always thought I hated Fritz, at least a little. But that feeling had faded with time.

"I went into the chief accountant's office today and renewed an argument I've been having with him," Fritz began slowly, holding his coffee cup in both big hands. "He tried one of his long technical explanations on me, the kind that's supposed to baffle anyone except a fellow accountant. I followed him all the way. Then I picked a hole in his major point, one he was deliberately glossing over, and tore his argument to pieces. It was all there in my head, just waiting. That crazy cap works; it really works. And it scares me spitless."

I could see that Fritz had been doing some heavy thinking, and not on statistics. He was a much more knowledgeable man than Atom or myself in the nitty-gritty world of business, and a sometimes slow but thorough thinker. Atom, genius though he was, seldom fully explored the consequences of following any given line of action.

"The more you look at it, the bigger it gets," Fritz said slowly. "It's not just classroom work — there's the six accreditation institutions for all U.S. colleges — the entire job-skills qualification system — the contacts you make in school — all that will end."

"And bring an end to the good ol' boy network," said Salya. "Good riddance; we women never shared in it anyway." Salya had not worked since finishing her B.A. in history; she was too busy raising the kids of an ambitious young executive.

"There's more to it than that," Fritz went on, his voice very earnest. "It will tear up the whole social structure. What will it do to our system of licenses, for instance? A twenty-year-old kid could take enough medical courses in a few months to become a surgeon. He could pass any medical exam. But does he have the stability and sense of responsibility you want in a person

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holding your life in his hands? Our entire licensing system will fall apart! Anyone can be a lawyer, an accountant, a doctor, an airline pilot. And financial consultants? We'll have a million people wanting to become instant financial whizzes, so they can manipulate Wall Street. And they could do it, too! The market would become obsolete overnight. And what happens then to venture capital? The kind Computer Education is going to need to expand into the giant it will have to be to provide all these programs?"

I could only look at Fritz with new respect. In some ways he had by far the best education in this little group.

"If you just turn your machine loose on the world without lots of preparation, it's going to cause the greatest revolution since Gutenberg. And the speed with which it will spread will be devastating. Society will literally fall apart. It gets down to a fundamental question, one you two bright lights haven't thought of yet. Who's going to shovel the shit? In a world where everyone is well-educated, and anyone can be anything he chooses — who's going to do the millions of necessary menial jobs?"

Atom was staring at Fritz in consternation. "My God, do you think we haven't considered that?" (Well, *I* hadn't, but this didn't seem a good time to mention it.) "Fritz, don't you realize how much the overall human potential will be increased? We'll build robots to shovel the shit! As for licenses and tests for capabilities, society will have to devise new ones, tests that use the academic knowledge for starters and go on to demand a demonstration of real abilities. The accreditation system that will emerge will be *better* than the one we have now. You've said yourself that a lot of people with a good paper education can't actually do the work you hire them for. They learn while doing the job, or they don't learn at all. We will *have* to make the necessary changes because we'll need specialists as much as ever."

"What about the poor people of the world?" asked Salya. "I mean the *really* deprived masses, like the millions of peasants in China and India, the slum dwellers in Buenos Aires and Caracas? What will EasyEd do for them? And can they afford it?"

"Oh, sure. The company with the patent —" He looked at Fritz. "— will get enormously rich, but the process can become so routinized once the education tapes are made that it will be dirt-cheap for everyone. We'll have to prepare some very basic programs for the illiterates, but the process is so fast, you could still make an engineer out of a slum dweller in a year. Of course all the programs would be in English, so the Indian peasant —" He stopped and looked at us.

"I just realized — we could go on all *night* and not see everything! — we could make English a true second tongue for everyone on Earth. Computer Education already has English

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programs in virtually every language spoken today. Learning English could be a prerequisite for taking the other courses. For the first time, a universal language ... think what that could do to person-to-person communications. The real 'global village' here at last!"

"We could sit here all week and not think of every ramification," said Fritz, voice so low he seemed to be talking to himself. "What will universal higher education do to the money standard? Will we still have normal commerce after everyone has his expectations for a better life raised so high in such a short time?"

"They should." I butted into his almost private thoughts. My own brain had begun working again, and I spoke with more confidence than I actually felt. "People will still need all the physical necessities they do now. There's no reason to think society is going to break down. A better education will make everyone understand just how fragile the underpinnings of the modern world really are, and anxious to keep the system functioning — even if it means occasionally shoveling some shit, before we get those robots built. Sure, the world is going to change dramatically, but it *should* be for the better."

"Here's a quick example," Atom joined in. "We now have maybe one percent of the population engaged in original research in this country — and we're one of the leaders. If enormous numbers of people are going to use their higher educations, maybe twenty-five percent will have to do some sort of original individual work. I can see a whole new ethic arising that says everyone must contribute his grundgy little bit during the workday — a shorter one, of course — but then is free to go home and compose original music, or write plays, or do research analyzing astronomical data — the possibilities are endless. But EasyEd can make the life of virtually everyone on Earth more satisfying and fulfilling."

Fritz could only shake his head, unable to believe.

"If we get imprinting working on a large scale," I got back into the discussion, "the increased education itself will provide the means for solving all the problems it causes. With a world filled with intelligent, well-educated people, why *couldn't* we handle anything that comes along? Isn't that the ideal this country has been working toward for years? Your own company is trying to do the same thing; only the speed and efficiency are different. I agree with you that society will have to change enormously. But with universal — not just literacy, but high-level *education* — real at last, any society that can't hold together needs shaking up anyway."

I don't believe Salya had really thought the implications through until this discussion. I saw her expression change, almost as though a cloud had intruded between her and the nearby

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lamp, throwing her face into shadow. Very suddenly all the values of her typical Jewish liberal education were being challenged, and she couldn't summon the conviction to withstand the assault. Atom could. It was his nature to plunge recklessly ahead once certain of his views, regardless of the consequences. But Salya had acquired a healthy respect for the real world, and the often stupid and stubborn way in which it operates.

The question really turned on how much faith you had in the perfectability of the human animal, one of the hoariest of old philosophical arguments. I felt that people could adapt, would be willing to accept work then beneath their education level, when they knew such labors were necessary for a time to keep the production gears grinding. So did Atom. But Fritz and Salya were convinced society would fall apart, that the only way the imprinter could be introduced was slowly, very slowly — and its basic nature made that impractical. If Computer Education didn't grab a patent and produce caps and tapes by the millions, once the principle was known, someone else would.

Once Salya had converted, she grew even more determined than Fritz to suppress Atom's discovery. She saw nothing ahead but utter catastrophe, the breakdown of civilization, the triumph of anarchy. She saw visions of migrant workers refusing to pick vegetables, of red-aproned butchers unwilling to swing their sledges at the heads of bawling cattle — she saw her two sons shriveling into the stick limbs and swollen bellies of starvation.

As the night wore on, Salya became more and more vehement, replacing Fritz as the main voice of opposition. I became worried about her. She was genuinely, truly convinced civilization could not stand up under this drastic a change, that Atom and myself were on a wrong-headed course that could destroy us all. We were equally determined to patent and produce. Atom finally told Fritz he was going to look for backing from another computer-education firm, and that was the final straw for Salya. She started crying in fear and frustration, then went into hysterics.

That broke up the useless, overly prolonged argument. Fritz led Salya off to their bedroom, where I heard him insisting she take a tranquilizer. She may have, but their voices went on and on, loud enough to be easily heard where Atom and I sat in the living room. He had a rather stunned look on his face. Opposition from Fritz he could understand, but his own sister....

I was equally hurt and disheartened. It was almost three in the morning, and we were all very tired. There was a small daybed in Atom's room, and he invited me to sleep there. I took off my shoes and curled up under a blanket he brought me. It bothered me to go to sleep without brushing my teeth, but

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that's one of the guilt trips our present culture lays on you.

The narrow bed was hard and uncomfortable. I awoke about seven and couldn't get back to sleep. Atom was still snoozing away. I went to the hall bathroom, then returned to the bedroom for my shoes. After stepping back into the hall, intending to raid the kitchen for some cereal and milk, I noticed my hair in the mirror tile, and reached for my comb.

I still couldn't believe this was happening. Numbed by shock and fright, I turned my head enough to see Fritz, limned in the stark bright early morning sunlight from the kitchen windows. The huge .45 was in his right hand, his left curling around the clasped fingers to steady the gun for another shot. There was a pale ferocity on his face, the strained, desperate look of a not-too-brave fighting man standing between his family and the ravening beasts of the jungle.

But how could Fritz do this? He was not by nature a violent man.... Staring at his distorted face, when I should have been running or screaming for mercy, I suddenly understood something. The hate I saw there was not for me. It was for Atom, genius Atom, ungrateful Atom. Fritz had probably envied and loathed his young brother-in-law since the latter was a science whiz kid at sixteen. Stolid, purposeful, methodical Fritz. Dull but enduring Fritz. Somehow that hate and envy had combined with his fear for Salya and his sons, his sincere belief that we were wrong, that our ideas would destroy the world — and he had tormented himself through the long gray sleepless hours into the conviction that we had to be stopped, that to kill us was to defend his family. In a different way, he was as lost now as Salya had been last night in her hysteria. He had become a true believer who must act on his convictions, for once without thinking them through to the end. And he had slipped past the point of rationality and would not return until this deed was done.

The gun steadied, while I stood there bemused, unable even to look away. And then a small form in blue pajamas came running across the kitchen floor, screaming, and hurled herself at the extended gun. Salya caught it and dragged the barrel down just as it exploded. The bullet plowed a furrow through the rug at my feet and rebounded off the terrazzo floor beneath, to punch a hole through the gypsum wallboard behind me.

"*No Fritz!* That's not the way! Dear God, you're out of your mind! Atom! Help me!"

I hadn't heard the door behind me open, but Atom came running past and took the gun from Fritz's hand. The larger man made no effort to resist; just stood there, pale and lifeless as a badly done statue.

Salya glanced at me, seemed to un-

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stand at once that I was bloody but not seriously hurt, and led Fritz away to their bedroom.

By the time Atom got back to me, the pain had finally started. I've never had anything hurt so much in my life.

The towel in which I muffled the shattered tip of my nose had stopped the bleeding by the time Atom got me to the emergency room at the hospital. There wasn't much the doctor on duty could do except bandage it, recommend a good plastic surgeon, and send me home.

Atom called me later in the day, to say that Salya had made Fritz take two tranquilizers, and he was sound asleep.

I think I know Fritz Stubens pretty well now. Since the attempt to save his family and the world didn't succeed, he'll go the opposite route, try to make as much money as possible by aiding in its destruction. He'll help Atom patent his process, as soon as it can be done without credit to the college. And then Computer Education will sign an exclusive contract with Atom for the rights, and Atom will never have to worry about money again. I expect Fritz can see himself as the company president in a few years, the man responsible for making an eight-million dollar a year business into one of the giants of industry.

I didn't file charges, of course. I couldn't do that to Salya. Fritz has apparently fully recovered and seems his normal phlegmatic, hard-working self. He says hello and good-by when we meet, as if totally unaware he tried to kill me only a month ago. The report went on the police blotter as an accident, caused by the gun discharging when Fritz dropped it. I couldn't have been cleaning the old relic; no powder burns, and the angle of impact against my nose was wrong.

What really bothers me is that I've had some second thoughts myself. I'm no longer certain Atom and I are right. Maybe the world isn't ready for the imprinter, and it *should* be suppressed, at least for now. Maybe....

Coming soon

Next month's feature story is a totally fresh and fascinating new novella, "The Devil of Malkirk," by **Charles Sheffield**, along with new stories by **R. Bretnor, Ron Goulart, Christopher Anvil** and others. The June issue is on sale May 3.

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Charles Grant returns with the hair-raising story behind five grisly murders in the town of Oxrun Station....

Pride

BY

CHARLES L. GRANT

It was the middle of August when the nights changed in Oxrun Station. Some blamed it on the anticipation of a hurricane battering its way up the coast, its vanguard of ghost-clouds muting the stars; other blamed the two-week heat wave that had softened the tarmac, singed tempers and lawns; and still others accused the dying that robbed the evenings of their softness, filed edges on laughter, made walking the streets an exercise in silence.

As happened to me the night I left the Chancellor Inn and noted with a frown the empty porches, empty sidewalks. Usually there were strollers, creaking rockers, quiet whispers; usually the cars didn't move quite so fast. And usually I didn't have to listen to my heels on the pavement — flat, without echoes, as if I weren't there at all. The only sign of my passing were the shadows at my feet, darting ahead, sweeping back, teasing forward once again. I tried not to watch them, set reins on imagination, but I couldn't help jumping when a cat wailed behind a hedge.

A self-conscious grin as my left hand massaged the back of my neck while my right sought a trouser pocket. Nerves, I told myself; even the Lone Ranger would recheck his guns tonight. Nerves. It happened every time I fell into brooding, which today I suspected was working overtime.

First there's been the letter from my former wife, Carole. After expressing her customary, and sometimes genuine, concern for my welfare, she proceeded to extoll the therapeutic value of remarriage, in her case to a diplomat apparently drowning in money. I doubted the jibe was intended with malice, just as I'd doubted any of them over the years had been aimed at the

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jugular — but one can bleed to death by drops as well as gashes, and neither of us was weeping when the final papers were signed.

Then there was the slow and inexplicable erosion of my clients, and an unpleasant case which would be completed in the morning, a case that some had hoped would be the end of all the killing.

Late in April the first body had been discovered just outside of Harley, twenty minutes from the Station. A young man, horribly mutilated, dismembered, partially devoured. Four more were uncovered at three- and four-week intervals, each one somewhat nearer. Then, last week, Syd Foster had been arrested, charged with all five brutal murders, and that of his nephew, right here in the village. It was shocking, it was scandal, and virtually no one believed it. The arrest had been a reflex, an unthinking reaction to the outcry for safety, and Syd was my client and I was going to set him free.

That did not make me the most popular man in some parts of the county, but for a change the unobserved technicalities were a pleasure to behold. Syd was fifty, a postman and a loner, and I'd known him for years. He was no more a cannibal than I was a Darrow.

So I walked, and I pondered, and I almost missed the woman.

She was leaning against a red maple between sidewalk and curb, one arm around the bole and her head slightly inclined as if sharing a lover's whisper. Not overwhelmingly beautiful, but certainly attractive enough: gold-brown hair that sifted down and away from a face of gentle curves, eyes wide-set and dark, thin lips, peaked chin, the rest of her willow-slender in a print blouse and snug jeans.

She was humming.

I stopped, then, and I stared, finally cleared my throat falsely and found some faint courage. "Excuse me," I said in my best Samaritan voice, "but are you lost or something? Can I help you?"

She smiled, almost shyly. "No. I'm perfectly here, thanks."

I smiled back awkwardly and waited for inspiration to unleash the charm. But I could have waited all night for the silence I suffered. So I put a finger to my brow in a see-you salute and moved on. As far as the corner where I stopped and glanced back. She was watching me, still smiling, finally pulling back her hair, away from her eyes, behind her ears. A hesitation, a quick look to either side, and she walked toward me, hands clasped behind her back, shoes silent on the pavement.

"Jean," she told me, "and to tell you the truth, yes I do think I'm lost."

"Brian Farrell," I said, wondering about her perfume, rather odd and oddly compelling. "Where are you headed?"

She gave me an address on Woodland Avenue, three blocks to our right

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and four blocks up. I started to point, then drew back my arm. "If you like, I'll walk you," I said. "It's on my way, and I wouldn't mind, really." I grinned, feeling foolish.

"Well, I wouldn't mind either," she said, put a hand to my elbow and allowed me to lead her.

And as we walked she questioned me about the dark houses, the lack of pedestrian traffic, and I told her about the dying — and the inevitable conclusion that if Syd Foster was innocent, the killer was still free. She shuddered and hugged my arm; I straightened, and tried not to smile.

"That's really ... horrid," she said as we came to her street. "You sound like you know an awful lot about it, though. I mean, more than what you read in the *Herald*."

"I should," I said, after debating the answer. "I'm Syd Foster's lawyer."

There was no response. Instead, she scratched idly the back of my hand until we reached her front gate, set in a privet hedge that surrounded her home. Then, before I could say anything, she thanked me graciously for the escort, shook my hand, and left me standing alone, in front of a bulky grey Victorian caged by willow and beech, with a station wagon in the driveway and a yellow light on the porch. I blinked when the front door closed, blinked when the light died, stood for a long moment thinking I'd said something wrong. A shrug, then, and I walked away, turned around and walked back to double-check the address with a squint and a nod. What I would do with it I didn't know, but the fancies that came with it took my mind off Foster as I moved on home.

To dreams. Swirling, red-coated dreams I'd been having for weeks. Tangled sheets, a lost pillow, and several times waking to wonder why I'd wakened. Oversleeping at last and rushing late to the office to learn that Foster's hearing had been postponed to Friday. I was annoyed, and felt reprieved, and the relief on my face not soon enough hidden.

"You still go in two days," my partner told me stiffly.

Chester Frazier and I had been affiliated for just four years that month, an association instigated by Carole, who had ambitions I didn't, and who'd hoped some of Chet's drive would somehow rub off. Unfortunately for her (and I'm not sure about me), he had come to resent strongly my less than wholehearted devotion to the concept of the flamboyant. Not that there was all that much opportunity for it in Oxrun, but by the nature of the village there was a great deal of money and lots of connections to be made. He dogged them avidly. I ducked them quietly, preferring instead the relatively uncomplicated. For me, that meant wills and small suits and handling the estates of the far-from-wealthy. Chet called it charity work; I figured somebody had to do it, and it might as well be me. To save me from

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myself, then — and because he liked me, really cared — it was he who'd talked the judge into appointing me Foster's counsel. Small wonder he was put off when I wasn't enraged at the delay.

"No big deal," I said when he finally stopped his grousing. "All it means, for crying out loud, is two more nights in a cell. And if you believe him, he doesn't want to leave anyway."

"He could be out on bail, you know."

"He doesn't want it, Chet," I said patiently, marching over familiar ground. "Whoever, whatever's out there doing this has scared him to death. He thinks he's safer behind bars than in his own home."

"Brian, there are times...."

He stopped and shook his head in weary resignation, left my office for the reception area deserted out front. I watched him from my desk, rose and stood at the door. Frowned. He was a large man, girth and height, with curled blond hair and hand-tailored suits, and generally he moved like a man with a mission. Today, however, he almost shambled across the carpet.

"You look tired," I said.

He turned away from the plate-glass window overlooking Centre Street and made his slow way back to me, leaned against the wall that separated our rooms. "I am," he confessed. "Elizabeth needs braces, Amy's heart murmur isn't clearing, and for the past three days Alice has had me up four or five times a night to check on prowlers she keeps hearing in the yard." His smile was one-sided. "It's amazing," he said, "how the mundane can kill you."

I would have tried wit to lighten his mood, but he'd inadvertently taken one of Carole's favorite lines. So I tried to change the subject.

"I met a girl last night. Lives over on Woodland. Nice girl. Pretty." He grinned. "I think I'm in lust."

"Oh, great, Brian, just great. Your practice is seeping away through the baseboard, and you say you're in love."

"Lust," I corrected. "I don't know her that well."

He didn't appreciate the joke. Instead, he grunted sourly and ducked into his office. It was just as well. At that moment my phone rang — another client moving out, thanks for all this killing going on. It was an old woman, with seven cats and little money, and I didn't bother to argue because I knew she wouldn't handle the shadows stalking their homes — but I wished it would happen to Chet for a change. I was getting tired of it, just as I'd grown tired of Carole not understanding that comfort to me didn't have to mean rich.

When that ended, however, I had only been relieved; the call I'd just taken was making me scared.

Worse. At the end of the day Chet hinted rather strongly he was seriously considering finally going it alone. He had

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expenses, he told me, and he couldn't carry me much longer unless I got off the mark.

It was a long walk home, then, and a tasteless short dinner. I couldn't read, couldn't watch television, couldn't find the nerve to walk over to Jean's. The way things were going, she'd probably not know me.

The porch was the best place I'd discovered for self-pity, watching the neighbors enjoying their lives, watching the children enjoying their living. A good dose of maudlin now and then, I thought, was good for the soul, but that too was denied me the moment I stepped out.

The humidity had turned to fog, the air touched with ice, and some blocks away I heard a police siren screaming. It was the wrong sound for the night, the wrong sound for the times. I shuddered and went in, would have gone straight to bed but the telephone rang.

"Brian? Brian Farrell?"

I gaped, and I grinned, and since the telephone table was right in the hallway, I sat at the bottom of the staircase and aimed my feet toward the door. "Jean? Is that you, Jean?" Brilliant, I thought; you should write for the theater.

"Am I bothering you?"

A bitter laugh. "Anything but."

She paused, and I heard a faint rustling on the line. "I hope you're not mad, but when I heard that siren I thought about what you told me last night and...." She laughed, sounded breathless. "Well, I scared myself is what I did. I needed a friendly voice."

"At your disposal," I said gallantly, and hoped Carole's ears were smarting.

We talked for almost an hour, most of it I realized later about my own problems, not hers, and when I rang off with a promise for dinner, I was virtually whistling.

But the dreams came again, not over till dawn.

And when I got to the office, Chet wasn't there.

Puzzled, but not worried, I left a message on his desk and went to see Foster. He wasn't talking, however, and I was gone in ten minutes. He bothered me, I suppose, more than he should have, a concern not helped by the change in the weather — the clouds had thickened, had greyed, and a drizzle started falling. Strong enough to streak dust on windows and darken the curbs, but not enough to wash them or to warrant a coat. Dismal, I decided, was the perfect word for the day.

When I returned from lunch, Chet was waiting. Impatiently, close to anger. His hair was unkempt and his shirtfront was wrinkled.

"Jesus," I said. "Chet, did something happen to —"

He shut me off with a slash of his hand, turned and went into my office where he poured himself a whiskey from my bottle on the sideboard. His hands were trembling, and just at his

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temple a tic pulled at his eye.

"I've been to the police," he said. "I talked to Fred Borg."

I didn't know what to say. So I said nothing. Just sat.

"Last night —"

"The siren," I said quickly.

He nodded after a moment, after draining his glass. "I was walking around the house from the garage after taking out the garbage. Bunch of kids had been cutting through the yard, I think I mentioned it yesterday. Alice's prowler. Anyway, I heard something, so I went back to have a look. Intrepid husband stalks wily teenager, or an alley cat, you know?" His smile was grotesque. "It was something, but I don't know what the hell it was. It stayed under the trees, growling at me." He poured another drink. "When I tried to get to the back door, it came after me."

"My god," I said softly, more stunned by his look than by what he was saying — it was almost as if he were ready to cry.

"I don't know what made me do it," he continued, "but I grabbed my lighter from my pocket and lit it. I wanted to see what it was, but I scared it off instead. But it was big, Brian. Christ, it was big."

"Well, what did they find? Some kind of dog?"

His look turned to disgust. "Nothing. Not a goddamned thing. I could tell Borg thought I was drinking or something. If it hadn't been for the, uh ... any other time he probably would've made me blow up the balloon. As it is, he told me about a dozen other calls he gets every night. Trying to make me feel better. A member of the loony club." Then he looked at his glass and tried a weak smile. "Alice is having a fit. She wants me to sell the place today and move to New York. That's why I came in, to get a few papers and do some work at home. She ... well, if anybody calls...."

"Sure, of course," I said quickly.

He nodded as he set his glass down. "And you're ready for Foster this afternoon?"

"Chet, for god's sake, give me some credit, all right?"

It was the wrong thing to say, an against-the-grain stroking of his already frayed temper.

"Credit? You want credit? For what, Brian? For pissing away a great chance to set yourself up as a damned fine lawyer? For fucking up a perfectly good marriage? For screwing around with some woman while your life goes down the tubes?" He shoved a trembling hand back through his hair, raised a fist and dropped it. "I don't understand people like you, Brian." An apology of sorts. "I swear to god, I don't understand."

He left before I could respond, but by the time the front door slammed shut, I realized I had nothing to say. The language we spoke was English, but somewhere along the line all the communications broke down and what

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came to our ears was little more than gibberish.

Nevertheless, I was angry. So much so that by the time I reached Judge Ford's chambers in the courthouse, my manner had become brusque, my words clipped, my presentation aimed not only at freeing Syd but flaying the prosecution and police as cold-bloodedly as I could. No histrionics here, just a marching out of statements placing Syd miles away from each of the first four killings, a few tart reminders about Constitutional law and Miranda, and not a few acid comments about damages done to my client's reputation.

When I was through, the prosecution folded — as he would have done if I'd only smiled and told him his case was full of shit. But he was also perspiring, and Judge Ford couldn't help the admiration in his voice as he dismissed the case, sent us home, and gave me a look that wondered what the hell kind of pills I'd been taking since I'd seen him last.

It was, admittedly, an excellent job, one Chet would have been proud of had he seen it. Syd, on the other hand, only thanked me curtly and left me standing on the courthouse steps, trying hard not to run as he headed for home. I returned to the empty office and filed all the papers, straightened up my desk, wandered about for nearly an hour before realizing I was pacing. I should have been pleased with myself, and in a way I was. But it was a desperate, cold, emotionless sort of pleasure, a combination of the residue of ash my anger had left me and the understanding that, unlike Chet, I could never become addicted to something like this.

I ate at the Chancellor Inn.

I drank at the Chancellor Inn.

I wondered what was wrong with me that I couldn't exult over my victory. After all, an innocent man was free, and the police were free to find the real killer.

I wanted to call Jean, and I didn't know her last name.

I stepped outside, and it was dark. Cool. The wind working at the trees and the drizzle hardening to rain. I lifted my collar and shoved my hands in my pockets, thinking I'd stop by Chet's and see how he was doing. Instead, I found myself outside Foster's house, blinking water from my eyelids as I tried to form the question that would get Syd to tell me just what it was, specifically, that had frightened him so much.

The front door was locked, no response to my knocking. I stepped off the porch and made my way around back, noting as I went that all the lights were on, top floor and bottom.

As I reached the corner, I heard someone grunting.

I stopped, ignoring the dampness that crawled down my back and clung to my cheeks. I listened, knowing I'd heard that sound somewhere before. Then the grunting was replaced by a

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snarling, the snarling by feet running across wet grass. A single stride, and I was in the tiny back yard, staring through the soft glare of the kitchen lights reaching out to the dark. I could see nothing, though something told me there was movement out there. A swirling, receding movement that had me moving after it until I saw the open back door.

My hesitation stalled me, swerved me, had me on the concrete stoop and inside, one hand up to shade my eyes from the overhead light.

Syd was lying partway beneath a small table, the chairs shoved back against the cabinets, two of them on their sides. There was red all over the tiled floor, bright red, running red, most of it pooled by the stumps where Syd's arms and legs used to be.

It was a fever dream then: the air filled with black motes, and all motion was studied. I fell into a calm and called the police, then fell into the yard and vomited my dinner. Blue lights, and flashlights, and a hand on my shoulder, an arm around my waist. Chet materializing and sitting with me in the station while I told my story and swallowed back the tears. He offered me a ride home. I declined; I needed to walk. I needed to breathe. I needed to drive that grunting from my head — like the softly deep sound of a contented animal feeding.

It never occurred to me that I might be in danger.

Nor did I head for anyplace in particular until I found myself on Woodland Avenue and nearly ran to Jean's gate, pulled it open and raced to the front door. She answered my knocking in moments, saw my face and pulled me slowly into the living room, murmuring and stroking until I was seated on a couch, knees together and hands clasped in my lap. When she left I almost stood, but there was no strength left in my legs; when she returned I must have looked at her like a lost puppy finally found by its mistress. She smiled, knelt beside me and pushed me back. A towel to my hair, my face; she took off my shoes and socks and dried my feet; until, at her urging, I told her what had happened, what I'd found.

She said nothing, and I kept on talking. She kissed my cheek, and I closed my eyes. And kept on talking.

She stripped off my jacket and shirt, dried my chest and back. And I kept on talking. Taking in the touch of her, the smell of her, feeling her breath against my ear as she whispered sympathies and soothings and a number of other things I did not hear because I finally told her how afraid I was — not of the nightcreature stalking the Station, but of the glass partitions that had been slamming down around me, one by one, cutting me off from wife, work, and the last of my friends.

"As if," I said as I stared at the ceiling, "I'm turning into a ghost. Life goes on, but not around me. I'm not there anymore."

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"No," she said gently, tracing a sharp nail along my jaw. "No, but you're here."

I smiled, grateful, and looked around the room, at the furniture heavy and heavily padded, at the fringed floor lamps, at the floral carpet, the floral wallpaper. Not cluttered, not spare.

"You live here alone." Not really a question.

"For the time being," she said. She gestured at the room and at the rooms beyond. "Mother left it to us, me and my sisters. I came to see if it was all right, worth keeping or worth selling." She sighed lightly and lay her cheek against my shoulder, reminding me it was bare. "It's big, though."

I shifted slightly. "It's late."

She said, "Stay."

I neither grinned like a rake nor silently thanked my lucky stars; I merely followed her upstairs where she made love to me, slept beside me, fixed me breakfast in the morning and pushed me out laughing, sending me home for some fresh clothes for the weekend. I very nearly ran, almost didn't answer the phone as I was leaving with my suitcase.

It was Chet, come to a decision.

"Don't say it," I told him, not really caring, thinking about Jean, the way she looked at me, the way she listened. "And you don't have to explain, either. I understand."

"You always understand," he said wearily. "I think that's part of your problem, Brian. You understand so goddamned well ... ah, the hell with it. Look, there'll be formalities and things — I'll call you later and we can —"

"I'll be at Jean's," I said. "Don't bother to call, I'll talk to you on Monday."

"Jean," he said flatly. I could almost see him shaking his head. "You never learn, do you."

"About what? Christ, Chet, you haven't even met her."

"I don't have to, pal. Unless she's into submission, she'll eat you alive." A pause. "Just don't be stupid, Brian," he said, more softly, more concerned. "You've had a hell of a week."

I rang off without saying goodbye, locked the door behind me and just did beat the next spate of rainfall to Jean's porch. When I burst inside, however, all grinning and foolish, the house was empty. I called, felt cold, hurried from room to room praying aloud I hadn't been wrong. Then I heard her calling my name, found a partially open door in the kitchen and went through to the garage where she was working under the hood of the station wagon.

"Damned thing's gone again," she said, straightening and wiping her hands on a greasy rag. "She has a zillion miles on her, but I was hoping she'd at least last until fall." She grinned and slammed the hood down, punched at it, and mimed a wince.

"How long has it been giving you trouble?" I tried to sound knowledgeable, though it sounded pompous.

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"Since I got here, in April."

I nodded and returned to the kitchen, stood at the back door and watched the rain slant in on the back of the wind. A cold wind now that flayed the trees and churned puddles in the grass. It was dusk at noon, and felt like midnight.

She was moving about the garage, shifting things, heavy and awkward.

April, she'd said — yet she'd told me she hadn't known about the killings, or my involvement with Syd, or my profession at all.

April, she'd said — when I'd first started fading.

The rain and Syd Foster's and something running through the dark; the kitchen and the blood and —

She grunted softly as she came into the room, and suddenly there was ice lodged deep in my throat.

When I turned she was standing in the doorway, the living room behind her. No lights had been turned on, and her face and figure were in shadow, pale shadows that had me squinting to keep her form from shifting. The wind keened in the eaves and across the mouth of the chimney; a gust, and the panes rattled. I looked to the floor and saw my shadow framed by the door window behind me, dark serpents and worms writhing down toward my shoulders.

Then she spoke my name lovingly and I moved around the room because I couldn't stand still; she began to talk quietly and I tried through the wind and the cold and the images of blood to listen and understand, without having to scream: about how people thought of this animal and that, how cats were female and dogs were male, women were feline and men were bestial, and with roles these days so swiftly blurring —

I opened the refrigerator; it was empty.

— wouldn't it be fascinating to think about what new mythic creatures would have to conform to new dreams, what extraordinary nightthings would have to fill in the void; but it wasn't all that bad because people wouldn't believe any more than they used to, and with violence still growing —

The cupboards, the cabinets, the drawers were all empty.

— who'd know the difference between two types of nightmare, as long as there was care taken in the hunting.

I leaned over the sink and thought of Chet's warning.

"Who are you?" I said, and wished I'd been drinking.

"Jean," she said simply.

"What ... what are you?" I said, and wished I were dreaming.

"Your lover, a friend —"

"You know what I mean," I said harshly, spun around, and she was still standing there, in the doorway, in the shadow. I wanted to be afraid, the most natural reaction, but first there was the anger of what I thought was betrayal.

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"Someone," she said, "who's been looking for someone like you. Not weak in the old sense, but not always strong enough to fight his own battles. A wonderful streak of feminine sensitivity, plus a little masculine posturing he knows is a sham. A man, Brian, who was more alone than he knew."

"You drove them away," I said weakly.

"There are times, like now, when vulnerability breeds belief."

I should have argued, but I couldn't. The wind was too noisy, and I couldn't focus my anger, and when she started to move toward me, I was too frightened to run.

"We have needs too," she said when she reached me, tilting her head and looking up at me sideways. "Physical" — her hands on my hips — "Emotional" — that smile she first gave me — "and the practical, Brian. In the smaller towns we like I think they still call it respectability, a lot easier to get with a solid man in the house. Like a lawyer, for instance. A low-keyed man who never rocks the boat."

"You drove them away."

"You do what you have to."

Then a word caught me, and echoed. "You said ... we?"

"Why, my sisters," she said, and her expression turned bemused. "A small lie. There's no mother. I came here looking, and one day I found you."

The house trembled at a blow, and rain crashed against the windows.

Her bemusement grew: "Why ... why don't you think of yourself as something like the king of beasts, Brian, with five lovely mates to choose from, who'll keep you warm, make you content, keep the world from intruding and making you sad. You'll work, of course, because a man like you has to. But so will we, until it's time to move on." She touched my chin with a finger. "Think about it, darling, don't be rash. I know what you're thinking, you know, what you'd like to do now."

I shook my head, once.

"Of course you want to run," she said sternly. "You wouldn't be human if you didn't. And you're wondering how you could ever live with my sisters and me." She shrugged. "Well, sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't."

I watched and said nothing when she started to leave me. It was too much, and it wasn't enough, and she had all my feelings pegged down to the last. And worse — she knew I almost believed and, in almost believing, was tempted.

I followed her into the front hall. She opened the front door and helped me into my coat. Then she smiled warmly, and sadly. "Go ahead," she said. "It's all right, believe me. But as a favor to me, please stay on the porch."

I nodded dumbly, shivering at the wind that clutched wildly at my jacket and my hair, crossed the threshold with my arms folded tightly over my

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chest. But before I could even begin to wonder about madness and nightmares and the perfect reality of the storm in spite of its fury, she whispered my name as she closed the door behind me. I turned and she was shadow, she was shimmering, she was Jean and she was smiling.

"Two things to consider," she said, "just to help you out. The most important is this: you'll never, ever, have to be alone again. We'll give you more pride than any man's ever had."

Oh Jesus, I thought; for god's sake, stop smiling!

She did. Abruptly. Expressionless now.

"The other thing is ..." and she glanced to the street, to the storm, back to me. "They won't believe you, if you decide you have to run."

And she left me alone as she closed the door, grunting.

"Now then, we want you to write a large, sweeping novel called 'The Last Days of L.A.' chronicling events of the big earthquake and mud slide. We'll have it ready for immediate release in six languages the day after the Richter hits 9.2."

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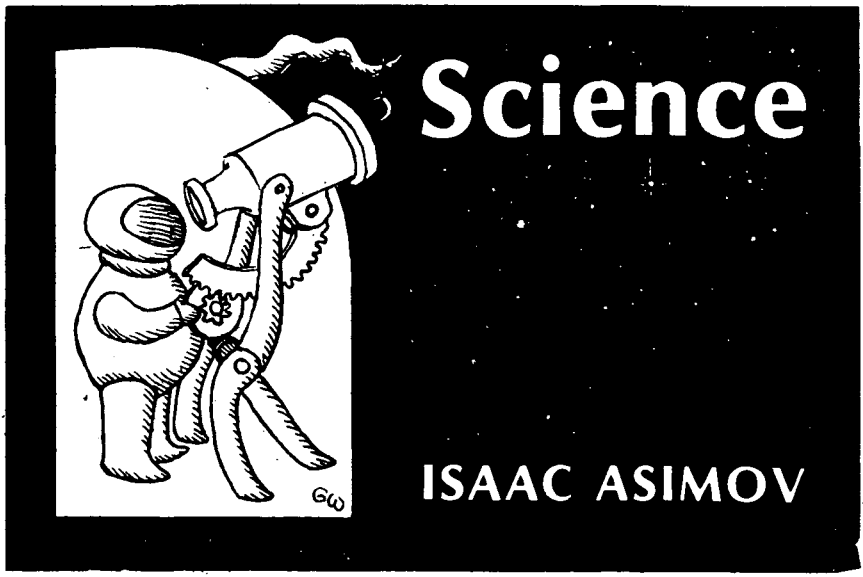

Drawing by Gahan Wilson

READ OUT YOUR GOOD BOOK IN VERSE

The first mnemonic sentence I ever learned, when I was quite a small boy, was "Read Out Your Good Book In Verse."

If you take the initial letters of these words — ROYGBIV — you get the seven colors, in order, that Isaac Newton (1642-1727) reported in the optical spectrum: Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Indigo, and Violet.

I was delighted beyond words at this discovery; not so much at the spectrum, which seemed perfectly straightforward to me, but by the existence of mnemonic sentences. It had never occurred to me that such a thing was possible, and for a while I thought I had the key to all knowledge.

Just invent enough mnemonic sentences, I thought, and you won't ever have to memorize anything again.

Unfortunately, as I was later to discover in almost all the great ideas I was ever to have, there was a fatal catch. You had to memorize the sentences, and they were just as hard to remember as the raw data — even harder. For instance, to this day, I don't really have "Read Out Your Good Book In Verse" memorized. The way I get it is to think of the colors of

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Newton's spectrum in order (something I have no trouble in doing) and then work out the mnemonic sentence from the initial letters of the colors. That's what I had to do when I started this essay.

I had a different kind of trouble with the mnemonic, too. It wasn't accurate. I occasionally came across books which showed me colored pictures of the optical spectrum, and I had no trouble seeing red at one end, and then following it down through orange, yellow, green, and blue.

Beyond blue I had a problem. What I saw at the other end of the spectrum was a color *I* called "purple." (Actually, I called it "poiple" as all decent Brooklyn kids did, but I knew it was *spelled* "purple" for some arcane reason.)

That wasn't fatal. I was willing to accept "violet" as a la-di-da, fancy-shmancy synonym for "purple," on a par with "tomahto" and "eyether." And I could always modify the mnemonic into "Read Out Your Good Book In Prose."

What bothered me much more, however, was that I saw no color between blue and violet. My eye could make out nothing that I could identify as "indigo." Nor could anyone I consulted see this mysterious color. The best I could get out of anyone was that indigo was blue-purple. In that case, though, why wasn't blue-green a separate color?

Finally, I said "The heck with it!" and left it out. I changed the mnemonic sentence to "Read Out Your Good Book, Victor" (or "Read Out Your Good Book, Peter"). What's more, I can find no modern physics texts that list indigo among the colors of the spectrum. They list six colors and no more.

Nevertheless, such is the force of tradition, that some twenty years ago, when I wrote an essay on the spectrum for a Minneapolis newspaper, and made no reference to indigo, I received several letters denouncing me quite vigorously for having omitted a color.

Nevertheless, I will continue to do so in this essay:

I described how Newton first obtained the light spectrum in 1666 in my essay THE BRIDGE OF THE GODS (F&SF, March, 1975). The existence of the spectrum did not in itself, however, indicate the nature of light. Newton himself thought light consisted of a spray of ultra-tiny particles, traveling in straight lines. He reasoned this was so from the fact that light cast sharp shadows. If light consisted of waves, as a competing suggestion maintained, then light would be expected to curve about the edge of an obstacle and cast a fuzzy shadow or even no shadow at all. Water waves curved about

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obstacles, after all, and sound, which was strongly suspected of consisting of waves, did the same.

Newton's contemporary, the Dutch scientist Christian Huygens (1629-1695), was the chief supporter of the notion of light-waves, and he maintained that the shorter the wave, the smaller the tendency to curve about obstacles. Sharp-edged shadows were, in that case, not inconsistent with the wave-notion provided the waves were short enough.

As a matter of fact, in a book published posthumously in 1665, an Italian physicist, Francesco Maria Grimaldi (1618-1663), reported experiments in which he found that shadows were not perfectly sharp-edged and that light *did* bend, very slightly, about obstacles.

Newton knew of this experiment and tried to explain it in terms of particle theory. His successors, however, convinced that Newton could do no wrong, and that if he said "particles" it was particles, simply ignored Grimaldi.

Finally, in 1803, the English scientist Thomas Young (1773-1829) swung the weight of opinion to the side of waves. He passed light through two narrow orifices in such a way that the beams, as they emerged, overlapped on a screen. The overlapping did not simply increase the light upon the screen. Instead, it produced alternating bands of light and darkness.

If light consisted of particles, there was no way of explaining the appearance of bands of darkness. If it consisted of waves, then it was easy to see that there were conditions under which some of the waves might be moving upward as others were moving downward, and the two displacements would cancel each other, leaving nothing. In this way the two patches of light "interfered" with each other, and the bands of light and darkness were called "interference fringes."

This phenomenon is well-known in the case of sound, and produces something called "beats." Interference fringes are the optical analogs of sonic beats.

From the width of the interference fringes, Young was able to make the first estimate of the length of the light-waves and decided they were in the range of 1/50,000th of an inch, which is correct. He determined the wavelength of each of the colors and showed, with reasonable accuracy, the manner in which the wavelengths decreased from red to violet.

Of course, while wavelengths are a physical reality, colors are not. Anyone, given the proper instruments and training, can determine the wavelength of a particular variety of light-wave. Determining its color, however, depends on the individual response of the pigments in the retina, and the interpretation that the brain makes of that response.

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Different retinas might not be absolutely alike in their response to a particular wavelength. Some eyes, which are defective in certain retinal pigments, are partially or entirely color-blind. And even if two people detect color with equal sensitivity, how can anyone compare the mental interpretation? You cannot describe what you see when you see red, except by pointing to something that gives you the impression of red. Someone else will agree that it gives *him* the impression he, too, has been taught to call red, but how can you possibly tell whether your impression and his are identical?

Two people may forever agree on what to *call* the color of every object and yet forever *see* different things altogether. And no one can possibly explain color to someone who has been blind from birth, so that the possibility of pointing to something and saying, "This is red," is non-existent.

What's more, as one goes along the spectrum, seeing only one wavelength's worth at a time, so to speak, there is no sharp change from red to orange, or from orange to yellow. There is a very slow and gradual shift, and there is absolutely no way of saying that "at this point the color is no longer red, but is orange."

If you were to move along the wavelength range and ask each of a great many people to indicate where the color has definitely ceased being orange and become yellow, you are sure to get a scattering. Different people will indicate slightly different wavelengths. Textbooks that therefore give limits, and say yellow stretches from one particular wavelength to another, are being misleading.

I think it is better to give a wavelength that is in the middle of the range of each color, a wavelength on which people with normal retinas will agree to call red, or green, or whatever.

Light wavelengths have traditionally been given in "Angstrom units," named in 1905 for the Swedish physicist Anders Jonas Angstrom (1814-1874), who first used them in 1868. An Angstrom unit is one ten-billionth of a metre, or 1×10^{-10} metres.

Nowadays, however, it is considered bad form to use Angstrom units because they disrupt the regularity of the metric system. It is considered preferable now to use different prefixes for every three orders of magnitude, with "nano" the accepted prefix for a billionth (10^{-9}) of a unit.

In other words a "nanometre" is 10^{-9} metres, so that 1 nanometre equals 10 Angstrom units. If a particular light-wave has a wavelength of 5,000 Angstrom units, it also has a wavelength of 500 nanometres, and it is the latter that should be used.

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Here, then, are the mid-range wavelengths of the six colors of the spectrum:

color	*wavelength (nanometres)*
red	700
orange	610
yellow	575
green	525
blue	470
violet	415

How long can a wavelength be and still produce a color that is detectably red to the eye; how short and still produce a color that is detectably violet? This varies from eye to eye, but the longest red wavelength, as seen by normal eyes before it fades to blackness is usually given as 760 nanometres, and the shortest violet wavelength as 380 nanometres.

Although Thomas Young himself invented the term "energy" in 1807, it was not till the middle of the 19th Century that the conservation of energy was understood, and not till the beginning of the 20th Century that it was clear that the energy-content of light increased as the wavelength decreased. Of the colors of the spectrum, in other words, red is the least energetic and violet the most.

It isn't immediately obvious (at least to me) why short-wave light is more energetic than long-wave light, but the situation improves if we look at the matter in another way.

In one second, a beam of light will travel 299,792,500 metres or, roughly, 3×10^8 metres. If the light that is traveling happens to have a wavelength of 700 nanometres (7×10^{-7} metres), then the number of individual waves that will fit into that one second's length of light is 3×10^8 divided by 7×10^{-7}, or about 4.3×10^{14}.

That is the "frequency" of the light, and what it means is that, in one second, light of wavelength 700 nanometres will vibrate 430 trillion times.

We can work out the frequency for the mid-range of each color:

color	*frequency (trillion)*
red	430
orange	490
yellow	520
green	570
blue	640
violet	720

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If we consider frequencies, it seems to me that the greater energy of the short-wave light becomes more apparent. The short waves vibrate more quickly. If you are shaking something, it will clearly take more energy to shake it quickly than to shake it slowly, and so the shaking object will contain more energy if it is vibrating quickly. So it is that the basic discovery of quantum theory is that there is a unit of energy of radiation ("quantum") that is proportional in size to the frequency of that radiation.

The longest red wavelength, and hence the least energetic bit of visible light, has a frequency of just about 4.0×10^{14}, or 400 trillion. The shortest violet wavelength, and hence the most energetic portion of visible light, has a frequency of just about 8.0×10^{14}, or 800 trillion.

As you see, the farthest visible stretch of violet light has just half the wavelength, and therefore twice the frequency and twice the energy, of the farthest visible stretch of red light.

When we are dealing with sound, we have notes going up the scale: do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti, do. If we wish, we can repeat that several times in either direction. In going from any "do" to the next higher "do," we exactly double the frequency of the sound waves. And if we start with "do" as the first note, and continue to count notes as we go up the scale, then the eighth note is "do" again and we have doubled the frequency. For that reason, we call the stretch from "do" to "do" an "octave," from the Latin word for "eighth."

That notion is extended, so that any stretch of wave motion of any kind, from a particular frequency to double that frequency, is called an octave. Thus, the stretch of light waves from the extreme red to the extreme violet, with a range of frequency from 400 trillion to 800 trillion is called an octave, even though light doesn't consist of notes, and certainly not eight of them. (If you want to draw an analogy between colors and notes — a very poor analogy — just remember that there are only six colors. Even if you resurrect indigo, you only have seven.)

Sound-waves vary in pitch as the wavelength changes. The longer the wavelength (and the lower the frequency), the deeper the sound. The shorter the wavelength (and the higher the frequency) the shriller the sound. The deepest note the normal ear can hear is perhaps 30 vibrations per second. The highest note the ear can hear varies with age, for the upper limit recedes as one grows older. Children can hear sounds with a frequency of up to 22,000 per second.

If we begin with 30 and double it over and over, we find that after 9 doublings, we reach a frequency of 15,360 per second. Another doubling

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will carry it past the shrillest sound a child can hear. Consequently, we can say that the human ear can hear sounds over a stretch of a little more than 9 octaves. (The 88 notes on the standard piano keyboard have a range of a little more than 7 octaves.)

In contrast, our eyes see light over a range of exactly 1 octave. This may make it sound as though vision is very limited compared to hearing, but light-waves are much shorter and more energetic than sound-waves and can carry correspondingly more information. The typical visible light-frequency is about 500 billion times as high as the typical audible sound-frequency, so without meaning to downgrade the importance of hearing, there can be no question that our primary method of obtaining information concerning our surroundings is through vision.

The next question we might ask is this: Is the one octave of light all there is, or merely all we see?

Through most of history such a question would have sounded silly. A person would take it for granted that light, by definition, is something you see. If you can't see any light, it is because no light is there. The thought of invisible light would seem as much a contradiction in terms as "a square triangle."

The first indication that "invisible light" was not a contradiction in terms came in 1800.

In that year, the German-British astronomer William Herschel (1738-1822), who was famous as the discoverer of Uranus two decades before (see THE COMET THAT WASN'T, F&SF, November 1976) was experimenting with the spectrum.

It was common knowledge that when Sunlight fell upon you, you felt a sensation of warmth. The general feeling was that the Sun radiated both light *and* heat, and that the two were separate.

Herschel was wondering whether the heat radiation was spread out in a spectrum as light was, and he thought he might draw some conclusion on the matter if he placed the bulb of a thermometer at different parts of the spectrum. Since yellow, in the middle of the spectrum, seems the brightest portion, he expected temperature to rise higher as one progressed from either end of the spectrum toward the middle.

That did not happen. What he noticed, instead, was that the temperature rose steadily as one progressed away from the violet and reached its maximum in the far red. Astonished, Herschel wondered what would happen if he placed the thermometer bulb *beyond* the red. He tried it and found, to his even greater astonishment, that the temperature was higher

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there than anywhere in the visible spectrum.

This was three years before Young's demonstration of the existence of light-waves, and, for a time, it seemed as though there were indeed light rays and heat rays that were refracted differently, and partially separated, by a prism.

For a while, Herschel talked of "colorific rays," those that produced color, and "calorific rays," those that produced "calor," which is Latin for "heat." This had the virtue of sounding cute, but not only was it a gauche mixture of English and Latin, but it simply begged for endless misunderstandings due to misreading and typographical errors. Fortunately, it didn't catch on.

Once Young's demonstration of light-waves was accepted, it could be maintained that what existed beyond the red end of the spectrum were light-waves that were longer than those of red, and of lower frequency. Such waves would be too long to affect the retina of the eye and were, therefore, invisible, but except for that, they might be expected to have all the physical properties of the waves making up the visible portion of the spectrum.

Eventually, such radiation was termed "infra-red" radiation, the word "infra" coming from the Latin meaning "below." The term is apt, since the frequency of infra-red light is below that of visible light.

This means that infra-red light also has less energy than visible light, and it may seem strange, in that case, that the thermometer registered a higher figure in the infra-red than in the visible portion of the spectrum.

The answer is that the energy content of light is not all that must be taken into account.

We now know that the heating effect of the Sun's radiation does not depend on a separate set of heat rays. Instead, it is the light itself which is absorbed by opaque objects (at least in part), and the energy of this absorbed light is converted into the random energy of atomic and molecular vibrations — which we sense as heat. The amount of heat we obtain depends not only on the energy-content of the light, but on how large a fraction of the light we absorb, rather than reflect.

The longer the wavelength (at least in the visible part of the spectrum) the more penetrating the light and the more readily it is absorbed, rather than reflected. Hence, even though red light is less energetic than yellow light, the greater efficiency of red-light absorption is such that it overbalances the other effect (at least where Herschel's thermometer was concerned). It is for this reason that the red region of the spectrum raised Herschel's

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thermometer to a higher temperature than other portions of the spectrum did and why infra-red raised it higher still.

All this makes perfectly good sense in hindsight, but even after Young's demonstration of light-waves was accepted, the wave nature of infra-red could not simply be taken for granted. It would be necessary to *demonstrate* that wave nature, and that was hard to do. Experiments that were perfectly plain, where visible light was involved, because you could *see* what was happening — you could see the interference fringes, for instance — would not work with "invisible light."

You might imagine, of course, that you could use a thermometer instead. If there were interference-fringes of infra-red radiation, you might not see them, but if you ran a thermometer bulb along the screen on which the radiation existed, you would find regions in which the temperature did not rise and regions in which it did, and these regions would alternate — and that would be it.

Unfortunately, ordinary thermometers were simply not delicate enough for the job. It took them a long time to absorb enough heat to reach an equilibrium temperature, and the bulb was too thick to fit inside the interference fringes. For about half a century, therefore, after the discovery of infra-red radiation, there wasn't much to be done with it, for the lack of proper instrumentation.

But then, in 1830, an Italian physicist, Leopoldo Nobili (1784-1835), invented the "thermopile." This consisted of wires of different metals joined at both ends. If one end is placed in cold water and the other is heated, a small electric current is set up in the wire. The current increases with the temperature difference between the two ends.

The current is easily measured, and a thermopile measures temperature far more quickly and sensitively than an ordinary thermometer does. What's more, the business end of a thermopile is considerably smaller than the bulb of an ordinary thermometer. For these reasons, a thermopile can measure the temperature of a small region and follow the ups and downs of interference fringes, for instance, where an ordinary thermometer couldn't.

Working along with Nobili was another Italian physicist, Macedonio Melloni (1798-1854). He found that rock-salt was particularly transparent to infra-red radiation. He therefore manufactured lenses and prisms out of rock-salt, and used them to study infra-red.

Between his rock-salt equipment and a thermopile, Melloni was able to show that infra-red radiation had all the physical properties of ordinary light. It could be reflected, refracted, polarized, and it could produce inter-

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ference fringes from which its wavelength could be determined. In 1850, Melloni published a book summarizing his work, and, from that time on, it was clear that "invisible light" was not a contradiction in terms, that the light spectrum extended well beyond the one octave visible range.

By 1880, an American astronomer, Samuel Pierpont Langley (1834-1906), went even further.

He made use of refraction gratings rather than prisms, and these spread out the infra-red radiation into a wider and more efficient spectrum. He also devised a temperature indicator called a "bolometer," which consisted, in essence, of a fine platinum wire, blackened to increase the efficiency with which it absorbed heat. Even tiny increases in the temperature of the wire increased its electrical resistance markedly, so that the measurement of the intensity of the electric current along it could indicate temperature changes of a ten-millionth of a degree.

In this way, Langley was able, for instance, to do away with the obscuring effects of absorption differences and to show that it was the yellow portion of the spectrum which was, in fact, present in the greatest intensity and produced the greatest heat rise — as Herschel had originally assumed. (Oh, well, if Herschel had better instruments, and if his observations had fulfilled his expectations, he would never have thought of looking outside the spectrum and he would not have discovered infra-red radiation.)

Moving into the infra-red region, Langley showed that there was infra-red radiation over a stretch of wavelengths from the 760-nanometre length of the longest visible wavelengths of red light up to 3,000 nanometres. (1,000 nanometres, or 1,000 billionths of a metre, is equal to 1 micrometre, which is 1 millionth of a meter. Therefore, 3,000 nanometres is usually described as 3 micrometres.)

This means that the frequency of the infra-red waves varies from 4.0×10^{14} (400 trillion) at the point where the visible spectrum ends, down to 1.0×10^{14} (100 trillion). Starting with 100 trillion, we must double twice to reach 400 trillion. Therefore, attached to the one octave of visible light are two octaves of invisible infra-red radiation.

The infra-red spectrum seems to cut off sharply at a frequency of 100 trillion (or a wavelength of 3 micrometres), at least as far as the Solar spectrum is concerned. Is that all there is, and is there no radiation of longer wavelength and lower frequency that can exist?

For that matter, what about the other end of the spectrum? If there is radiation beyond the red end, is there also radiation beyond the violet end?

We'll take up these questions and others in next month's essay.

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Poems to Play in the Piccolo

BY

GEORGE C. CHESBRO

Trevin Coe crouched in a depression beside a huge elm at the edge of the forest and watched the stripers in the clearing tear apart the ancient Cessna. The tool chest was found and its contents, augmented by the stripers' hands, feet and clubs, used to unscrew, bang and rip loose the plane's fuselage and other components. Gasoline was siphoned into hide bags and stacked with the disintegrating Cessna's sharp metal shards onto a ragged, horse-drawn caravan of travoises which were dragged back and forth from the forest. Judging from the speed at which the stripers had arrived after his wounded plane had come down, Trevin estimated the stripers' encampment to be no more than three or four miles away.

There was one spastic-limbed, wild-eyed blank, obviously a crazy, working with the stripers. A second blank, gaunt and grim, sat on horseback in the middle of a narrow trail thirty yards from where Trevin was hiding. A Quaker or medico, Trevin thought.

Trevin was aware that, in a wild, metal, wire, glass and, especially, gasoline were infinitely more important than people; the stripers would not begin searching for him until they had finished with the plane. They were in no hurry; the stripers knew he would be nearby, or already dead. If the stories he had heard were true, and Trevin had no reason to doubt them, no blank on foot, alone and without some kind of map, could long survive in a wild. If he didn't wind up futuremelt after straying into a slag radiation strip at the boundary, he could sink into an acid bog, drink poisoned water, be killed by another tribe of stripers, or even be mauled by a bear or eaten by

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the wolves he'd heard had survived and were thriving in the nation's wild zones. He knew he needed a horse if he were to have any chance of getting out.

He was neither strong nor athletic, and the idea of actually trying to knock a man off horseback and steal his horse struck Trevin as almost absurdly comic. Yet it turned out to be considerably easier than he had anticipated. The tall gaunt man was absorbed in his thoughts or the activity in the clearing and did not hear Trevin come up the trail behind him. Trevin swung his backpack by its shoulder straps, jumped into the air at the last moment and managed to hit the blank's head. The man cried out, lost his balance and fell to the ground. Trevin swung his pack over his shoulder, climbed up into the saddle and felt a rush of exhilaration at his initial success and the prospect that he might yet escape.

Unfortunately, actually riding the horse turned out to be far more difficult that knocking off its rider. Trevin sawed and yanked on the reins, trying to turn the horse around. When these maneuvers didn't work, Trevin yielded to his panic and struck the animal on its corded neck with his fist, prompting the horse to rear up. Trevin had just enough time to flash his pack before he was unceremoniously dumped on the ground beside the stunned blank. Something crackled in Trevin's right shoulder, and acid-pain burned through the muscle. Trevin groaned and started to roll over, then froze when he felt the jagged metal point of a spearhead prod his jugular. He was trapped, pinioned between the need to soothe the agony in his shoulder and the death that would surely slide into his throat if he resisted the spearhead. He slowly lay back, accepting the pain.

"Thee are a dead fool," the gaunt blank said, rising to his feet and dusting off his clothes. Quaker.

He was surrounded by stripers, with the one crazy blank hopping up and down at a point inches from Trevin's left ear, spattering foul-smelling saliva. A few still had traces of manufactured clothing draped over their bodies, but most were clad in deer or cow hide. The striper holding the crude spear to his throat was a heavily scarred black man with two fingers missing from his left hand. The once-vivid orange stripes on his forearm and forehead were beginning to fade, which meant that the man would be free to leave the wild within a week, unless he chose to retread.

Interesting to be at the mercy of a fader, Trevin thought, but purely academic as far as he was concerned. Life in a wild was lived on a cusp of waking nightmare and was measured in seconds.

"Name?!" the black man snapped.

"Gaagh—" The pressure of the spearpoint on his throat was eased slightly, and he croaked: "Trevin Coe."

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"Striper hunter?!"

"God, no!" Trevin swallowed hard, gasped for breath. "Will you give me sanctuary?"

"Stick him, Fred!" a voice called from somewhere in the crowd. "He's a hunter!"

The black man caressed Trevin's left cheek with the tip of the spearhead. "What was in the pack you flashed?"

"No-nothing. Just, uh, emergency supplies in case I came down. Which I did. The flash was an accident; the pack went off when I fell."

"Contraband?"

"No. Just food and water."

"No kidding?" The striper smiled, shook his head and laughed, as if in amazement at what he was hearing. "If it wasn't contraband, why were you carrying it in a flash-pack?"

Now that, Trevin thought, was going to be a difficult question to answer. He was spared the trouble of thinking up another lie that wouldn't be believed when a squat, bald-headed caucasian pushed through the circle and touched the black striper gently on the arm.

"He's lying, Freddy," the bald striper said in a soft, almost feminine voice. "And he was carrying a lot more contraband than he had in the pack. There was flash smell inside the plane."

Tendons writhed in the black striper's neck, and his knuckles were white on the spear shaft. "Gun emplacement, blank?! Have you been gunning for stripers?!

"You can't flash metal," Trevin said, surprised to find that the prospect of imminent death had cleared his throat and sparked a measure of boldness. He rolled his eyes until he found the Quaker, standing slightly behind him, to his left. "I've hurt no one, brother. Will you help me?"

The Quaker blinked slowly. His expression was cold, implacable, and the man's black eyes reminded Trevin of a shotgun's twin bores. "They know I oppose killing thee, blank, but that won't stop them from doing it."

"Well, you might *say* something!"

"I will not," the Quaker said, scorn roughening his tone. "Thee have freely chosen your own destiny. I come here to help my striper brothers who are in terrible need, not fool blanks who come here of their own volition."

"Hey, brother, my plane crashed."

"So we noticed. But why were thee flying over a wild in the first place? This isn't Disneyland."

"Brother, I—"

"Thee are not a Quaker or medico. There is absolutely no reason for a blank like thee to be in a wild except for evil purpose. If thee want my help, I will pray with thee."

Trevin yelped and closed his eyes when he saw the black striper draw back his spear for a killing thrust, then tentatively opened one eye when the thrust did not come. What he saw was a red-headed striper holding the black striper's arm.

"We'd better check with Larry," the

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redhead said. "Anyone who flashes stuff as fast as this guy might be wanted by power. Even if we can't barter him to power, we can trade him to the Roberts or some other homo tribe. He's young, good-looking."

The striper with the spear thought about it, asked: "Where's Larry?"

"He took a load back to camp. He should be here in a—"

"I'm here now," a voice, or half-voice, said from somewhere behind Trevin. The voice was deep yet breathy, as though a cold wind was blowing in and around the words.

There was the crunching sound of boots on gravel. The black striper made a small bow, stepped back into the circle. The footsteps moved around Trevin's head, and Trevin found himself looking up into the pale, almost colorless eyes of a man missing a huge chunk of his throat. The heavily muscled man wore unpatched manufactured clothes, gifts or spoils from new stripers or dead blanks, a symbol of authority. A rifle, rusted and useless but nonetheless a second symbol of authority, was slung over one shoulder. A scar in the shape of a cross bisected the broad orange stripe on the man's forehead.

"Give me straight answers, blank, or I'll kick out your teeth," the half-voiced man said calmly in his ominous, sibilant whisper. "Is power searching for you?"

"No."

"What contraband were you carrying?"

"Drugs," Trevin said with a sigh he hoped sounded like surrender. "Heroin."

The toe of the half-voiced man's boot touched Trevin's jaw. It lingered for a few seconds, and then the striper abruptly squatted down and leaned forward until his face was no more than a few inches from Trevin's. "Why flash drugs?" the man asked. "You might have used them to barter your way out."

"I just panicked, sir. I forgot where I was."

"What was your route?"

"Route? Oh—uh, I was bringing a shipment from Syracuse to New York. I—"

"You're a liar," the half-voiced man said easily. "And if you're lying about the contraband, you could be lying about power not being interested in you." The striper paused, bowed his head and scratched it. "I'm not going to mess with you here," he said at last. "I tend to get carried away, and I don't want to risk losing something that could be valuable to us. Do you know what a torture doctor is?"

"I think I can guess, sir. Please believe me; I haven't hurt any striper, and I wouldn't."

"Harrys Seven have a torture doctor. He's expensive, but it might be worth a heavy barter to find out what you've been up to. You'd be amazed how long a torture doctor can keep a man alive, when all that man wants to do is die. Think about it, blank."

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As if to punctuate, or contradict, his last statement, the half-voiced man flicked a huge, knotted fist at Trevin's chin, and Trevin sank into a humming darkness.

Ouch."

"I'm sorry," the woman said distantly. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

The woman's head was bowed down close to Trevin's, and he could not see her face. The rays of the late-afternoon sun slanted through an opening in what appeared to be a sapling and adobe-like ceiling of a crude wooden lodge. The light reflected off the woman's close-cropped, faded auburn hair. The scalp was clean. Deft fingers kneaded, then adjusted a thong on some kind of strap wound around his chest and right shoulder. The flesh of his right arm felt cold.

"Uh, ma'am, you're not a torture doctor, are you?"

The woman made a hissing sound of disgust between her teeth. "You're lucky, blank. Your shoulder's not broken, only dislocated. I could see that it was out when they brought you in. I've put it back in place, and the salve and harness should dull the pain — at least for tonight. After that ... if I were you, I'd tell Larry the truth. I'm sure they'll start by just pulling shoulder out again."

"I did tell him the truth."

The woman tugged again on the hide harness. Trevin winced, but the pain, cloaked by the odd chilling sensation in his arm, was not really so severe.

"No," the woman said in a distant, disinterested tone. "Do you think you can lie to Class Two criminals about something like a known drug route? Very stupid." She paused, added: "Or maybe not so stupid. If your story weren't so outrageous, you wouldn't have made them curious and they'd probably have killed you on the spot."

"You a medico?"

"No. A healer. We don't get many medicos willing — or able to afford the time — to come this deep into the wild."

The woman finished, leaned back on her heels and raised her head. She wore authority: shoes, jeans and a denim shirt that looked almost new. Trevin knew she had once been beautiful, was still attractive. She had fine features, soft grey eyes, a full mouth that was now set just short of a smile. There was a broad orange band across her forehead.

"My God!" Trevin said, startled. "You're a striper!"

"Why should that surprise you?"

"I ... I don't know. I knew that a lot of women follow their striped men into a wild, but—"

Now the smile broke, showing clean, even teeth the woman obviously spent a lot of time caring for. "You're a male chauvinist. Don't you think women are capable of becoming Class Two criminals?"

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Trevin gazed into the gray eyes and knew that the woman had never physically harmed anyone. "You must be an ideo," he said at last.

"You know next to nothing about wilds."

"What makes you so certain?"

"If you did, you'd know that nobody — blank or striper — ever asks why someone has been striped. A question like that, or an answer to it, is as intimate as a kiss. Everything that's ever happened in the past is erased the moment a man or woman, striper or blank, enters a wild."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend you."

"I'm not offended." The woman smiled again, wryly, as if at some secret amusement, then rose to her feet.

Trevin rolled over on his left side and managed to sit up on the worn, patched blanket which had been placed beneath him. He reached across his body with his left arm and rubbed his strapped shoulder. "My arm feels so cold," he said, wanting the woman to stay a few minutes longer. "What did you put on it?"

The woman arched her eyebrows slightly. "Secret. If I went and told everyone how I do what I do, someone else would take my place and I'd be out gathering wood, right?" She paused, and a light that was pride glowed in her eyes. When she spoke again, pride burnished her voice. "If you were in a hospital on the outside, you'd still be in agony. Power pumps all its garbage, industrial and human, into the wilds and then forgets about it. Power assumes this is all poisoned jungle, and for the most part it is; our children are born mutated. Still, you'd be surprised at some of the good things — like the game — that thrive here."

"I'm not only surprised, I'm interested."

"Are you?"

"Yes," Trevin said seriously. "I'm Trevin Coe. Is it permitted for me to ask your name?"

"Marlene."

"What's the closest checkpoint?"

Marlene laughed. "You're an optimist."

"Still...."

"Albany, to the north," the healer said in a bemused tone. "But I've heard they're repairing and enlarging the lead shielding. No one can go in or out until the work is finished."

"Then I'm close to New York. I could go down the old Thruway."

"Close? That kind of optimism is called ignorance. Or insanity. You're deep in a wild, my friend. It would take a veteran striper on a good horse a week and a half to get down to New York. A green blank wouldn't last a day."

"Why won't your tribe give me sanctuary?"

"Only stripers are given the kind of sanctuary you're talking about."

"I meant no harm."

"Then why were you flying over

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the wild? Why did you flash your contraband? Power isn't here; only stripers. What else are we to think but that you were carrying something that could cause us harm?"

"I told your chief what happened. I was carrying drugs. I panicked when the plane came down and I—"

"Don't bother lying to me," Marlene said, waving her hand in a dismissive gesture and turning toward the entrance. "I can't help you."

The woman pulled aside the rough hide covering the entrance, hesitated, then let the hide fall back into place. "How are things on the outside?" she asked without turning. Her voice was tentative.

Bitterness welled, carrying sharp words on its crest. "As peaceful as always," Trevin said scornfully before he'd taken time to think about it. "Power hums in its sleep. Business is booming, and most people are happy as clams — which they might as well be. The great illusion shines brighter than ever."

Now the woman turned. She beamed and clucked her tongue in amusement. "Well, well," she said. "A closet ideo! You certainly don't talk that way on the outside. That kind of talk might not get you striped, but it would certainly get you a few months of sun and sand and lectures in a Class One Bermuda rehab center. Or are things worse now?"

"About the same. Things are exactly the way power wants them, so why change? Have you been here long?"

Marlene did not answer.

"Are the stripes permanent?" Trevin persisted, feeling he had nothing to lose. For the moment, at least, the healer was the only thing standing between him and the savage stripers outside. He wanted to know her better. "Can you ever leave?"

Marlene answered his question with one of her own. "What's your opinion on the wilds, ideo?"

"I really don't know enough about them to have an opinion," Trevin said carefully. "Sometimes I meet a Quaker or medico on the outside who's been in one, but they're pretty tight-lipped about what goes on here."

"You know the wilds exist," Marlene said, her voice suddenly thick with scorn. "You know what they're used for; garbage dumps and penal colonies."

"I'm opposed to the poison dumping," Trevin replied, deciding that in this, at least, he would be honest. "Industry does it because it can do anything it wants, and this kind of dumping is the most cost efficient means of disposal. As far as the stripers in the wilds are concerned, I don't think the punishment is so severe. Class Twos are habitually violent criminals who have killed and maimed, or threatened to. If what I've heard about the old prisons is true, I'd much prefer banishment to a jungle — even a poisoned one — to years spent in a cage." Trevin paused, lowered his voice. "Except, of course—"

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"Except?"

"Except for the ideos they put here. That's as cruel and evil as the way they supposedly mixed Class One and Two in the old prisons."

"Typical soft-headed, fuzzy ideo thinking," the woman said her tone heavily sarcastic. "Any normally adjusted outsider would tell you that an ideo on the loose is even more dangerous than a violent criminal. Killers, robbers and rapists only attack individuals, but an ideo attacks power itself. Ideos, if they're not hot-headed and are careful whom they talk to, can take years to catch. In the meantime, they've left a poisonous cloud of doubt and mistrust of power behind them. A single ideo can disrupt hundreds, even thousands, of lives. Ideos make people unhappy, and unhappy people are unproductive people. A mugger takes one individual's valuables; an ideo pecks at the very foundation of the system that produced those valuables, and the means to acquire them. They should have slapped you into a rehab center a long time ago."

"If you say so," Trevin replied sullenly. He knew it was ridiculous for a man in his position to be angered by sarcasm, but he was.

"You haven't mentioned the mutant children, ideo. The medicos smuggle contraceptives when they can, but power considers such devices immoral and they're contraband. Should all stripers resort to homosexuality or do without sex? I believe those were the only choices in the old prisons."

"I'm sorry," Trevin said simply.

The woman's tone abruptly changed, once more became tentative — even plaintive. "Does the Piccolo still play?"

Danger, Trevin thought, and he felt the muscles in his stomach knot painfully. He looked away, took a deep breath, slowly let it out. "I think so." He had tried to make his reply seem casual, but he knew he sounded tense. Now he wished the woman would go away. "There are always rumors."

"Have you ever seen a copy?"

"Once or twice. They're hard to come by, you know, and being caught with one means a drug-questioning session and a minimum of six months in a rehab center — if you don't have anything to do with printing or distributing it."

"How many pages was the copy you saw?"

"I don't know; maybe nineteen or twenty pages. Uh ... why do you ask?"

"Goodbye, ideo," the woman said, and walked quickly from the lodge.

Hours later the hide flap was pulled back to reveal a dark shape silhouetted against a midnight moon. Trevin knew it was Marlene even before she spoke.

"*How* does the Piccolo play?"

"Shrilly." Trevin's voice was clear and strong, despite the lump in his throat. The thought of the torture waiting for him in the morning would have loosened his tongue in any case,

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but — despite Marlene's obvious curiosity about the Piccolo — he had not dared hope to hear those words.

"Why is it shrill?"

"It refuses to be drowned out."

"No news is no news, brother."

"Controlled news is no news, sister."

There was a sharp intake of breath, then a sigh. "I thought so. You're an information-runner, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"You had copies of Piccolo in the plane?"

"Fifty thousand. I was bringing them to New York from the printing plant in Oswego. I had photos and raw news from the African wars in my backpack. I had to fly in over the wild because power has been scanning our regular route lately."

Suddenly the woman was on her knees beside him. She threw her arms around his neck, hugged him. Trevin could feel warm tears on his cheek.

"Good news, brother," Marlene whispered.

"Good news, sister."

She kissed his cheek, released him. A moment later a small wax torch anchored in the ground glowed, providing just enough illumination to permit Trevin to see Marlene's ghostly features and the hide packet she held like a child to her breast.

"Information," Marlene said. "The most dangerous contraband of all. What on earth would you have done when they started torturing you?"

"Told them the truth, of course."

"You were right to keep silent for as long as you did. Power would love to get its hands on you, and you'd have been bound and on your way to a checkpoint by now. You're worth a heavy barter, maybe even a rifle and a box of ammunition. You'd have been permanently striped."

"That's what happened to you, right?"

Marlene nodded. "I was a news-gatherer and distributor in Houston. They caught and striped me twelve years ago."

"God, Marlene, I'm sorry."

The healer merely shrugged as she leaned forward and loosened Trevin's shoulder harness. There was more pain, but it was manageable, and he could now move his right arm more freely.

"As long as the Piccolo still plays, it's worth it," Marlene said quietly. "When I played it, it was only four pages."

"Now we have five printing plants."

"I'll give you salve for your shoulder. You have to be able to use your arm."

"I'll manage."

"How did you plan to get your backpack through the checkpoint?"

"There's a secret way, an old water tunnel running from the Jersey Palisades under the Hudson to Manhattan. I'd never come through it to the wild, but we use the other end of the tunnel

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for printing and storage."

Marlene looked at him for a long time, and Trevin felt she wanted to say something other than what she did. "You have to leave soon. You need as much of a head start as you can get."

"What about the guard?"

"Asleep."

"How?"

Marlene smiled. "Another secret." She opened the hide packet, removed a fragile, well-worn piece of paper. "This is a map that will show you how to get to the New York checkpoint. I don't know how to get to the water tunnel from there."

"I do."

"You'll have to memorize it. I'm sorry you can't take it with you. Paper is hard to come by here; we have so many greater needs. That's the only copy. There's a horse tied outside. I understand you're a terrible rider, but you'll just have to learn quickly. Hurry, please."

Trevin took the map from Marlene's hand, leaned close to the wax torch and studied the faded writing.

"The X's show the wells that were safe to drink from when that map was made," Marlene continued. "Some of them may be poisoned by seepage by now; if you have any doubt, watch where the animals drink. One important thing; no matter how lost you may feel, *don't* try to search for or get on the old Thruway."

Something dark in Marlene's voice made Trevin look up into her face. The healer's mouth was twisted, her eyes hard.

"The wilds serve yet another purpose for power," Marlene said in a hate-shrouded whisper. "It's a pressure valve for some of the people in that peaceful, ordered society you come from. Any blank who's foolish enough can move freely in or out of a wild, no questions asked, as long as he doesn't carry firearms or any other contraband that might make us a threat to the checkpoint guards or people within rifle range of the borders. Some people find the notion of visiting a place without laws exhilarating. Every once in a while a group of macho blanks will get liquored up and take it into their heads to form a hunting party — and they don't care whether the game is animal or striper. If we're lucky, they don't strafe us from the air. The stupid ones come in with bows and arrows. They invariably get lost, and they invariably end up wandering up or down the old Thruway. Every striper knows it, every tribe loves to get its hands on a hunter, and that's why *you* mustn't go anywhere near it."

"I see," Trevin whispered. His mouth was suddenly very dry. He closed his eyes to see if he could remember the details of the map; satisfied that he could, he opened his eyes handed the map back to Marlene. "When they find me gone, won't they know that you helped me?"

"How could they? They won't *know* anything, except that the guard

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fell asleep and you slipped out and managed to steal a horse. Don't worry; I'm Larry's woman, and he's rather attached to me."

"If you have children, I can take them out. I know people who will give them good care and love."

Marlene shook her head. "Both my children are mutants. They couldn't survive outside."

Trevin choked and dropped his gaze, unable to say anything.

"There are rumors of a tribe to the south — Michaels Five — with children whose bite is poisonous," Marlene continued evenly. "In my opinion, it's only a story that tribe started to keep other stripers out of their territory, but it's something you should keep in mind as you approach New York."

Trevin rose to his feet, helped Marlene to hers, gently touched her cheek. "Marlene, is there anything I can do for you?"

"It's enough to know that the Piccolo still plays. Still, I—" She hesitated, looked away.

"Marlene?"

"Perhaps ... since you know a secret route, there is one thing I would like."

"Please name it."

Marlene again reached into the pouch, drew out a number of sheets of faded yellow paper. "Sometimes we get pieces of paper from medicos or Quakers, or captured blanks. These are ... poems I've written over the years. I know how valuable space is in Piccolo and how important it is to report on what's really happening on the outside. Still, I thought that maybe ... now and then ... readers might be interested in what life is like for us here in the wilds."

Trevin took the poems, squatted down by the torch and looked at them. He had meant only to glance at one or two, but he found himself carefully reading each one. When he had finished, his tears flowed freely.

"There is all *this* in the wilds?" Trevin asked quietly as he straightened.

Marlene nodded. "And more. Much that is savage, but also much that is strange and beautiful. Certainly more than power knows of, or intended."

"I'll be back. I'll bring things that you need."

Marlene shook her head. "Don't try to come back. I'm afraid you'll be back soon enough — as a striper. You're a blank now — and not a known medico, Quaker or crazy. You'll be attacked and killed. Stay outside and play the Piccolo as long as you can."

"There are tunes in the wilds for the Piccolo," Trevin said, carefully folding Marlene's poems and placing them inside his shirt, against his skin. "I've been a fool for not realizing that. I will be back. And I'll survive."

"You are an optimist," Marlene murmured, but Trevin had already slipped out of the lodge into the darkness.

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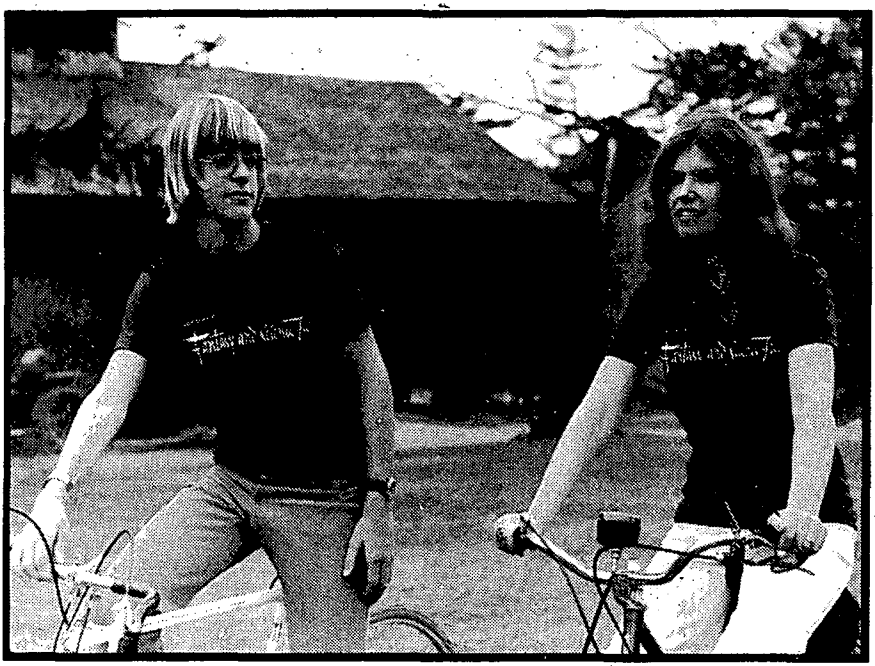

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Letters

Responding to our "self appointed authority," John Clute

In the February issue of this publication, John Clute returns again and again to harp on the commercialization of the SF genre and in making his point he exploits, rather than reviews, the work of Stephen Goldin, Paul Preuss, Orson Scott Card, yours truly and Gene Wolfe. Like Merv Griffin doing a theme show, Clute runs his number throughout all these so-called reviews, slipping in sly remarks, fey observations and doing everything short of what a critic is supposed to do. Underlying all of this is an absurd lament for the old days. It seems the genre has outgrown Mr. Clute's grasp. "...we knew that a genre still small enough to read was a genre small enough to understand. You couldn't be snuck up on from behind." Poor, confused John Clute. Oh, for memories of the way we were and let's hear it for SF's clubby atmosphere and the days of starvation wage advances and fans being the keepers of the flame. It is to puke.

Mr. Clute takes me to task for, as he puts it, betraying both myself and my ideas and for writing what he terms "a potted package tour of the space opera market." And as if that were not enough, he also takes it upon himself to review my title, my dedication (!) and my afterword. Mr. Clute, it would appear, is nothing if not thorough. At least, it would appear so to anyone who has not read the book.

What can one say about a self-styled critic who ignores all academic considerations in his reviewing, who attempts to address himself to the framework of the plot (but gets it wrong) and ignores completely all characterization and *story*, who, by implication, accuses a writer of having ulterior motives in selecting the people to whom he dedicates his work ... well, *this* at least, cannot be allowed to pass. It is certainly permissible for a reviewer to express opinions concerning the merit of the work, but this goes beyond that. Mr. Clute writes, "...with his dedication made not only to personal but to public friends Norman Spinrad *and* Harlan Ellison as well...." I'm not sure what Clute means by "public friends," but the inference seems clear and it leaves a very bad taste in my mouth, indeed. My relationship with each of those gentlemen has always been personal and is frankly none of Mr. Clute's business. However, just to set the record straight, I have known both men for a number of years and I admire and respect them. Harlan gave me a great deal of encouragement when I was just barely starting out and he continues to do so, showing me not a few kindnesses along the way. Norman was instrumental, along with Harlan, in helping me to overcome difficulties regarding payment for the story which was to become the basis of said novel and Norman introduced me to the person who sold it for me. Now, if that isn't sufficient grounds for acknowledging indebtedness by dedicating a book to them, I don't know what is.

Mr. Clute claims to see cynical commercial ambition lurking between the lines of my novel. While I may not be a great *artiste*, I do try to tell my stories in such a manner as to make them accessible to "consumers" and

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still have some artistic merit. But to find out "anything of interest beyond what Doc Smith could have told anyone in his sleep," it helps to read carefully. I have defended my concept of my work against sales personnel and art directors and editors whose concepts did not gibe with mine, some of whose commercial considerations make me seem like a supine Michaelangelo. And I am just as committed to defending my work against self-appointed authorities frantically reaffirming their own prejudices and insecurities. Incest is not any more appealing than rape.

—*Nicholas Yermakov*
Merrick, New York

In defense of French SF

I have to take issue with Baird Searles' review of *Heavy Metal* (January 1982): not that I liked the movie — truth to tell, I have not even seen it, and all indications are that I would loathe it. So let him clobber it all he likes, but *not* drag into the debate French science fiction, of which he obviously knows very little.

It *is* unfair, not to say downright impossible, to judge translations; what's worse, what little French SF has been translated is certainly not the best or the most characteristic of the field. Complex works are also more difficult to sell abroad.

While comics may have an edge over the written word in French SF (but that situation is not restricted to SF: comics do sell better in France, because they are better packaged and better respected, and as a consequence, often artistically better than in the USA), the same is true of the movies in the USA, and I don't think anybody could maintain that the Americans' idea of SF is limited to flicks with a heavy dose of violence (and a paltry dose of sex). At least, *knowledgeable* Americans' idea of SF...

Where it's at in French SF today would rather be social relevance, and exploration of reality in the Philip Dick way. I cannot give you a lecture here: leaf through Nicholls' *The Science Fiction Encyclopedia* for more details. It's reasonably well-informed.

Even French SF *comics* do not deserve the abuse heaped upon them by Searles; they don't all have a heavy dose of sex and violence, and I'd even venture to say that on the average they are better than what Marvel feeds the masses. And they can have content, too, and not be aimed at ten-year-olds: see for instance Christin & Mézières' *Valérian*.

I should point out that *Métal Hurlant* has long ceased to be the *dernier cri* of French SF comics. It may have been that when it was born in '75 (or thereabouts), and it did at that time feature some remarkable work (such as Moebius' *Le Garage Hermétique de Jerry Cornelius*, an experimental strip, noted for its paucity of balloons, by the way). Now, *Métal Hurlant* is only one magazine among others, whose quality has been slowly going down for some time.

And anyway, it seems to me that *Heavy Metal* has been using less and less of *Métal Hurlant*, and more and more domestic material. And all the artists, writers, and so on, who worked on *HM*, the movie, are American. *Heavy Metal*, the movie, is an AMERICAN product (with some British rock contributors in the soundtrack).

I wouldn't like to end this on a sour note, so let me congratulate you on George R. R. Martin's article in answer to Thomas Disch. Not only because I

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did not agree with Disch, but also because Martin makes some interesting points in trying to define the characteristics of the "Labor Day Group". Few people, it seems to me, have tried to analyse what those "post-new wave" writers have in common, and how they integrate what the New Wave has brought (especially on the level of characterization) with a more traditional, commercially palatable approach as far as plot is concerned...

—Pascal Thomas
Paris, France

Vodka and tomahto juice

Speaking as a preppie, I thought the story, "Maureen Birnbaum, Barbarian Swordsperson, as told to Bitsy Speigelman," by George Alec Effinger, (*F&SF*, January), was absolutely too neat. However, I did see one flaw in the story, and that was the sentence, "I'm drinking Bloody Marys," when I felt it should have read, "I'm drinking Bloodies." No true preppie would be caught dead saying "Bloody Marys" unless he or she absolutely has to because he or she is speaking to someone outside the preppie set.

—Muffy Mickens
Hollywood, Calif.

The Labor Day Guys?

I found George Martin's response to Tom Disch about the Labor Day Group both fascinating and puzzing. (December F&SF)

First — geez, what a terrible name that is for a supposed lit'ry movement! (Though of course Tom was branding a group and George is seeking to exhalt them. The name fits Tom's derogation but undermines George's thesis.)

Second, George draws upon a similarity between his own list of Labor Day Group folk and the configuration noted years ago by Algis Budrys. Trouble is, no one has demonstrated that the two groups are the same. George invokes a sort of synthesis of old sf methods and New Wave approaches, and implies this is the common element. This may be right but it can't be proved by merely pointing to the calendar. Indeed, I think the argument of mere generation consciousness is a false one. I'm older than the other people George lists by about a decade, and see little similarity between my work and, say, Vonda McIntyre's.

Third, as a writer I object to being included in anybody's group, and thus mixmastered into a homogenous "movement." I've always thought that the *differences* of voice, of thought, of approach were the most interesting things about writers. I read them (Martin or McIntyre, Bishop or Bryant) because of their varied flavors, their idiosyncratic perspectives. (And let us pause a moment to reflect on the wondrous plentitude of good writers we do see coming into the field, too; no mere list gets at that fact.)

Fourth, I'm not sure the New Wave "failed." It ended, sure, but it has a lasting legacy. (not the least of which is a name that meant something.)

But if you do insist on manifestos and movements and literary teams ... please ... at least call it something that doesn't grate so badly.

—Gregory Benford

Highly Offensive

The story in your January 1982 issue by Harlan Ellison held up to scorn the most sacred and holy beliefs

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of a large portion of this world's population. It was highly offensive to me and to many others who have read it. I would like to point out also that a story of this sort when written by a Jew is a prime cause of anti-semitism. Mr. Ellison should be more careful of what he does to his own people.

The story itself was not good and was based on a type of crude so-called humor that went out of style many years ago. The fact that you published it indicates to me that you still retain a large streak of that immaturity that is seen in high school papers that try to shock the adults who read them. Little boys fighting the big people.

I have been reading science fiction since the third issue of Hugo Gernsback's "Amazing Stories" and I have consumed rather large quantities of it but I have never seen anything so obnoxious as this.

—Francis F. Bodkin
Sayville, N.Y.

Deeply Affecting

I have been reading *Fantasy and Science Fiction* for more than twenty-five years, but never has one of your stories affected me as strongly and deeply as has Joanna Russ' "Souls." It is, I think, an excellent story for our time, particularly the ending.

Will you thank her for me, please? I, like her narrator Radulphus, find the Abbess' vision — of the world's suffering and cruelty — troubling me more and more as I grow older; yet, there is something in Ms. Russ' treatment of this theme that is fresh and somehow helpful, albeit most disturbing.

—Bruce Frishkoff
Ghent, N.Y.

Plea for more leather

I was quite annoyed when the November issue of F&SF arrived sporting a cover picture of another semi-clad female. It was my understanding from reading the May Letters column that your artists would be discouraged from this sort of representation of women. I hope it doesn't happen again.

I might have been more forgiving if the woman on the cover bore any resemblance to the heroine in *Talisman*. It is unfortuante Garland felt compelled to transform a strong, capable character like Sparthera into a winged vamp with a come-hither look. Niven and Girard plainly state (on page 130) that Sparthera wore a leather jerkin and her legs were "leather-clad," not bare. Don't your artists read the stories? (Perhaps Garland only read the last page, where Sparthera floats using the gold filigree wings!)

Such cover "artistry" does your magazine an injustice. You have featured the works of women writers more than any other publication. The female characters in your stories are three-dimensional, not the weak stereotypes that pervade so much of science fiction. In my four years of reading F&SF, I have never seen you print a sexist cartoon.

It just goes to show, you *can't* tell a book by its cover.

—Cynthia Skier
Cambridge, Mass.

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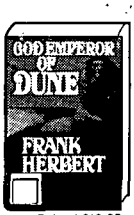

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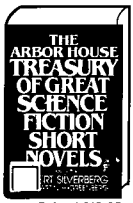

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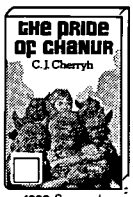

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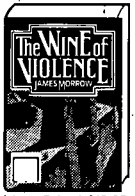

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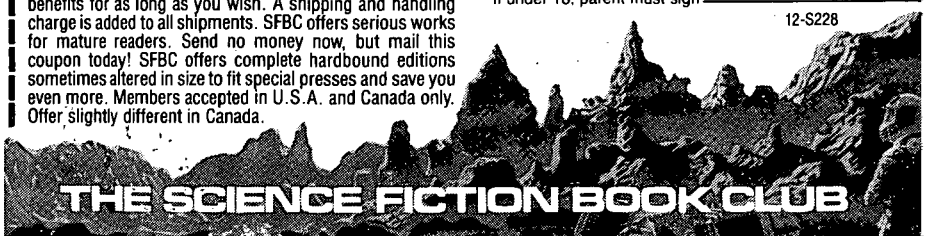

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